WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

A TEXAS RANGER

OH, YOU TEX!

TEXAS MAN

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THE LONE STAR OMNIBUS

THE LONE STAR OMNIBUS

containing three Texas novels
by
WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

A TEXAS RANGER

OH, YOU TEX!

TEXAS MAN

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THE TEXAS RANGER

CONTENTS

PART I

THE MAN FROM THE PANHANDLE

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	A Desert Meeting	13
II.	Lieutenant Fraser Interferes	30
III.	A Discovery	42
IV.	Lost!	51
V.	Larry Neill to the Rescue	61
VI.	"Somebody's Acting Mighty Foolish"	72
VII.	Enter Mr. Dunke	83
VIII.	"Would you Worry about Me?"	93
IX.	Down the Jackrabbit Shaft	103
X.	In a Tunnel of the Mal Pais	111
XI.	The Southerner Takes a Risk	123
XII.	Exit Dunke	132
XIII.	Steve Offers Congratulations	136

PART II

THE GIRL IN LOST VALLEY

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	In the Fire Zone	143
II.	A Compact	155
III.	Into Lost Valley	166
IV.	The Warning of Mantrap Gulch	187
V.	Jed Briscoe Takes a Hand	192
VI.	A Sure Enough Wolf	209
VII.	The Round-Up	219
VIII.	The Broncho Busters	226
IX.	A Shot from Bald Knob	238
X.	Doc Lee	249
XI.	The Fat in the Fire	259
XII.	The Dance	277
XIII.	The Wolf Howls	288
XIV.	Howard Explains	300
XV.	The Texan Pays a Visit	309
XVI.	The Wolf Bites	316
XVII.	On the Road to Gimlet Butte	327
XVIII.	A Witness in Rebuttal	333

FOREWORD TO YE GENTLE READER.

Within the memory of those of us still on the sunny side of forty the more remote West has passed from rollicking boyhood to its responsible majority. The frontier has gone to join the good Indian. In place of the ranger who patrolled the border for "bad men" has come the forest ranger, type of the forward lapping tide of civilization. The place where I write this—Tucson, Arizona—is now essentially more civilized than New York. Only at the moving picture shows can the old West, melodramatically overpainted, be shown to the manicured sons and daughters of those, still living, who brought law and order to the mesquite.

As Arthur Chapman, the Western poet, has written:

No loopholes now are framing
  Lean faces, grim and brown;
No more keen eyes are aiming
  To bring the redskin down.

The plough team's trappings jingle
  Across the furrowed field,
And sounds domestic mingle
  Where valor hung its shield.

But every wind careering
  Seems here to breathe a song—
A song of brave frontiering—
  A saga of the strong.

Part I

(In Which Steve Plays Second Fiddle)

THE MAN FROM THE PANHANDLE

A TEXAS RANGER

CHAPTER I

A DESERT MEETING

As she lay crouched in the bear-grass there came to the girl clearly the crunch of wheels over disintegrated granite. The trap had dipped into a draw, but she knew that presently it would reappear on the winding road. The knowledge smote her like a blast of winter, sent chills racing down her spine, and shook her as with an ague. Only the desperation of her plight spurred her flagging courage.

Round the bend came a pair of bays hitched to a single-seated open rig. They were driven by a young man, and as he reached the summit he drew up opposite her and looked down into the valley.

It lay in a golden glow at their feet, a basin of pure light and silence stretching mile on mile to the distant edge of jagged mountain-line which formed its lip. Sunlight strong as wine flooded a clean

world, an amber Eden slumbering in an unbroken, hazy dream primeval.

"Don't move!"

At the summons the driver swung his head sharply to a picture he will never forget. A young woman was standing on the bank at the edge of the road covering him with a revolver, having apparently just stepped from behind the trunk of the cottonwood beside her. The color had fled her cheeks even to the edge of the dull red-copper waves of hair, but he could detect in her slim young suppleness no doubt or uncertainty. On the contrary, despite her girlish freshness, she looked very much like business. She was like some young wild creature of the forest cornered and brought to bay, but the very terror in her soul rendered her more dangerous. Of the heart beating like a trip-hammer the gray unwinking eyes that looked into hers read nothing. She had schooled her taut nerves to obedience, and they answered her resolute will steadily despite fluttering pulses.

"Don't move!" she said again.

"What do you want?" he asked harshly.

"I want your team," she panted.

"What for?"

"Never mind. I want it."

The rigor of his gaze slowly softened to a smile compound both of humor and grimness. He was a man to appreciate a piquant situation, none the less because it was at his expense. The spark that

gleamed in his bold eye held some spice of the devil.

"All right. This is your hold-up, ma'am. I'll not move," he said, almost genially.

She was uneasily aware that his surrender had been too tame. Strength lay in that close-gripped salient jaw, in every line of the reckless sardonic face, in the set of the lean muscular shoulders. She had nerved herself to meet resistance, and instead he was yielding with complacent good nature.

"Get out!" she commanded.

He stepped from the rig and offered her the reins. As she reached for them his right hand shot out and caught the wrist that held the weapon, his left encircled her waist and drew her to him. She gave a little cry of fear and strained from him, fighting with all her lissom strength to free herself.

For all the impression she made the girdle round her waist might have been of steel. Without moving, he held her as she struggled, his brown muscular fingers slowly tightening round her wrist. Her stifled cry was of pain this time, and before it had died the revolver fell to the ground from her paralyzed grip.

But her exclamation had been involuntary and born of the soft tender flesh. The wild eyes that flamed into his asked for no quarter and received none. He drew her slowly down toward him, inch by inch, till she lay crushed and panting against him, but still unconquered. Though he held the

stiff resistant figure motionless she still flashed battle at him.

He looked into the storm and fury of her face, hiding he knew not what of terror, and laughed in insolent delight. Then, very deliberately, he kissed her lips.

"You—coward!" came instantly her choking defiance.

"Another for that," he laughed, kissing her again.

Her little fist beat against his face and he captured it, but as he looked at her something that had come into the girl's face moved his not very accessible heart. The salt of the adventure was gone, his victory worse than a barren one. For stark fear stared at him, naked and unconcealed, and back of that he glimpsed a subtle something that he dimly recognized for the outraged maidenly modesty he had so ruthlessly trampled upon. His hands fell to his side reluctantly.

She stumbled back against the tree trunk, watching him with fascinated eyes that searched him anxiously. They found their answer, and with a long ragged breath the girl turned and burst into hysterical tears.

The man was amazed. A moment since the fury of a tigress had possessed her. Now she was all weak womanish despair. She leaned against the cottonwood and buried her face in her arm, the while uneven sobs shook her slender body. He

frowned resentfully at this change of front, and because his calloused conscience was disturbed he began to justify himself. Why didn't she play it out instead of coming the baby act on him? She had undertaken to hold him up and he had made her pay forfeit. He didn't see that she had any kick coming. If she was this kind of a boarding-school kid she ought not to have monkeyed with the buzz-saw. She was lucky he didn't take her to El Paso with him and have her jailed.

"I reckon we'll listen to explanations now," he said grimly after a minute of silence interrupted only by her sobs.

The little fist that had struck at his face now bruised itself in unconscious blows at the bark of the tree. He waited till the staccato breaths had subsided, then took her by the shoulders and swung her round.

"You have the floor, ma'am. What does this gun-play business mean?"

Through the tears her angry eyes flashed star-like.

"I sha'n't tell you," she flamed. "You had no right to—— How dared you insult me as you have?"

"Did I insult you?" he asked, with suave gentleness. "Then if you feel insulted I expect you lay claim to being a lady. But I reckon that don't fit in with holding up strangers at the end of a gun. If I've insulted you I'll ce'tainly apologize, but

you'll have to show me I have. We're in Texas, which is next door but one to Missouri, ma'am."

"I don't want your apologies. I detest and hate you," she cried.

"That's your privilege, ma'am, and it's mine to know whyfor I'm held up with a gun when I'm traveling peaceably along the road," he answered evenly.

"I'll not tell you."

He spoke softly as if to himself. "That's too bad. I kinder hate to take her to jail, but I reckon I must."

She shrank back, aghast and white.

"No, no! You don't understand. I didn't mean to—I only wanted—— Why, I meant to pay you for the team."

"I'll understand when you tell me," he said placidly.

"I've told you. I needed the team. I was going to let you have one of our horses and seventy-five dollars. It's all I have with me."

"One of your horses, you say? With seventy-five dollars to boot? And you was intending to arrange the trade from behind that gun. I expect you needed a team right bad."

His steady eyes rested on her, searched her, appraised her, while he meditated aloud in a low easy drawl.

"Yes, you ce'tainly must need the team. Now I wonder why? Well, I'd hate to refuse a lady any-

thing she wants as bad as you do that." He swiftly swooped down and caught up her revolver from the ground, tossed it into the air so as to shift his hold from butt to barrel, and handed it to her with a bow. "Allow me to return the pop-gun you dropped, ma'am."

She snatched it from him and leveled it at him so that it almost touched his forehead. He looked at her and laughed in delighted mockery.

"All serene, ma'am. You've got me dead to rights again."

His very nonchalance disarmed her. What could she do while his low laughter mocked her?

"When you've gone through me complete I think I'll take a little *pasear* over the hill and have a look at your hawss. Mebbe we might still do business."

As he had anticipated, his suggestion filled her with alarm. She flew to bar the way.

"You can't go. It isn't necessary."

"Sho! Of course it's necessary. Think I'm going to buy a hawss I've never seen?" he asked, with deep innocence.

"I'll bring it here."

"In Texas, ma'am, we wait on the ladies. Still, it's your say-so when you're behind that big gun."

He said it laughing, and she threw the weapon angrily into the seat of the rig.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll amble down and see what's behind the hill."

By the flinch in her eyes he tested his center shot

and knew it true. Her breast was rising and falling tumultuously. A shiver ran through her.

"No—no. I'm not hiding—anything," she gasped.

"Then if you're not you can't object to my going there."

She caught her hands together in despair. There was about him something masterful that told her she could not prevent him from investigating; and it was impossible to guess how he would act after he knew. The men she had known had been bound by convention to respect a woman's wishes, but even her ignorance of his type made guess that this steel-eyed, close-knit young Westerner—or was he a Southerner?—would be impervious to appeals founded upon the rules of the society to which she had been accustomed. A glance at his stone-wall face, at the lazy confidence of his manner, made her dismally aware that the data gathered by her experience of the masculine gender were insufficient to cover this specimen.

"You can't go."

But her imperative refusal was an appeal. For though she hated him from the depths of her proud, untamed heart for the humiliation he had put upon her, yet for the sake of that ferocious hunted animal she had left lying under a cottonwood she must bend her spirit to win him.

"I'm going to sit in this game and see it out," he said, not unkindly.

"Please!"

Her sweet slenderness barred the way about as effectively as a mother quail does the road to her young. He smiled, put his big hands on her elbows, and gently lifted her to one side. Then he strode forward lightly, with the long, easy, tireless stride of a beast of prey, striking direct for his quarry.

A bullet whizzed by his ear, and like a flash of light his weapon was unscabbarded and ready for action. He felt a flame of fire scorch his cheek and knew a second shot had grazed him.

"Hands up! Quick!" ordered the traveler.

Lying on the ground before him was a man with close-cropped hair and a villainous scarred face. A revolver in his hand showed the source of the bullets.

Eye to eye the men measured strength, fighting out to the last ditch the moral battle which was to determine the physical one. Sullenly, at the last, the one on the ground shifted his gaze and dropped his gun with a vile curse.

"Run to earth," he snarled, his lip lifting from the tobacco-stained upper teeth in an ugly fashion.

The girl ran toward the Westerner and caught at his arm. "Don't shoot," she implored.

Without moving his eyes from the man on the ground he swept her back.

"This outfit is too prevalent with its hardware," he growled. "Chew out an explanation, my friend, or you're liable to get spoiled."

It was the girl that spoke, in a low voice and very evidently under a tense excitement.

"He is my brother and he has—hurt himself. He can't ride any farther and we have seventy miles still to travel. We didn't know what to do, and so——"

"You started out to be a road-agent and he took a pot-shot at the first person he saw. I'm surely obliged to you both for taking so much interest in me, or rather in my team. Robbery and murder are quite a family pastime, ain't they?"

The girl went white as snow, seemed to shrink before his sneer as from a deadly weapon; and like a flash of light some divination of the truth pierced the Westerner's brain. They were fugitives from justice, making for the Mexican line. That the man was wounded a single glance had told him. It was plain to be seen that the wear and tear of keeping the saddle had been too much for him.

"I acted on an impulse," the girl explained in the same low tone. "I saw you coming and I didn't know—hadn't money enough to buy the team—besides——"

He took the words out of her mouth when she broke down.

"Besides, I might have happened to be a sheriff. I might be, but then I'm not."

The traveler stepped forward and kicked the wounded man's revolver beyond his reach, then

swiftly ran a hand over him to make sure he carried no other gun.

The fellow on the ground eyed him furtively. "What are you going to do with me?" he growled.

The other addressed himself to the girl, ignoring him utterly.

"What has this man done?"

"He has—broken out from—from prison."

"Where?"

"At Yuma."

"Damn you, you're snitching," interrupted the criminal in a scream that was both wheedling and threatening.

The young man put his foot on the burly neck and calmly ground it into the dust. Otherwise he paid no attention to him, but held the burning eyes of the girl that stared at him from a bloodless face.

"What was he in for?"

"For holding up a train."

She had answered in spite of herself, by reason of something compelling in him that drew the truth from her.

"How long has he been in the penitentiary?"

"Seven years." Then, miserably, she added: "He was weak and fell into bad company. They led him into it."

"When did he escape?"

"Two days ago. Last night he knocked at my

window—at the window of the room where I lodge in Fort Lincoln. I had not heard of his escape, but I took him in. There were horses in the barn. One of them was mine. I saddled, and after I had dressed his wound we started. He couldn't get any farther than this."

"Do you live in Fort Lincoln?"

"I came there to teach school. My home was in Wisconsin before."

"You came out here to be near him?"

"Yes. That is, near as I could get a school. I was to have got in the Tucson schools next year. That's much nearer."

"You visited him at the penitentiary?"

"No. I was going to during the Thanksgiving vacation. Until last night I had not seen him since he left home. I was a child of seven then."

The Texan looked down at the ruffian under his feet.

"Do you know the road to Mexico by the Arivaca cut-off?"

"Yes."

"Then climb into my rig and hit the trail hard—burn it up till you've crossed the line."

The fellow began to whine thanks, but the man above would have none of them. "I'm giving you this chance for your sister's sake. You won't make anything of it. You're born for meanness and deviltry. I know your kind from El Paso to Dawson. But she's game and she's white clear through, even

if she is your sister and a plumb little fool. Can you walk to the road?" he ended abruptly.

"I think so. It's in my ankle. Some hell-hound gave it me while we were getting over the wall," the fellow growled.

"Don't blame him. His intentions were good. He *meant* to blow out your brains."

The convict cursed vilely, but in the midst of his impotent rage the other stopped and dragged him to his feet.

"That's enough. You padlock that ugly mouth and light a shuck."

The girl came forward and the man leaned heavily on her as he limped to the road. The Texan followed with the buckskin she had been riding and tied it to the back of the road-wagon.

"Give me my purse," the girl said to the convict after they were seated.

She emptied it and handed the roll of bills it contained to the owner of the team. He looked at it and at her, then shook his head.

"You'll need it likely. I reckon I can trust you. Schoolmarms are mostly reliable."

"I had rather pay now," she answered tartly.

"What's the rush?"

"I prefer to settle with you now."

"All right, but I'm in no sweat for my money. My team and the wagon are worth two hundred and fifty dollars. Put this plug at forty and it would be high." He jerked his head toward the

brush where the other saddle-horse was. "That leaves me a balance of about two hundred and ten. Is that fair?"

She bit her lip in vexation. "I expect so, but I haven't that much with me. Can't I pay this seventy on account?"

"No, ma'am, you can't. All or none." There was a gleam of humor in his hard eyes. "I reckon you better let me come and collect after you get back to Fort Lincoln."

She took out a note-book and pencil. "If you will give me your name and address please."

He smiled hardily at her. "I've clean forgotten them."

There was a warning flash in her disdainful eye.

"Just as you like. My name is Margaret Kinney. I will leave the money for you at the First National Bank."

She gathered up the rains deftly.

"One moment." He laid a hand on the lines. "I reckon you think I owe you an apology for what happened when we first met."

A flood of spreading color dyed her cheeks. "I don't think anything about it."

"Oh, yes, you do," he contradicted. "And you're going to think a heap more about it. You're going to lay awake nights going over it."

Out of eyes like live coals she gave him one look. "Will you take your hands from these reins please?"

"Presently. Just now I'm talking and you're listening."

"I don't care to hear any apologies, sir," she said stiffly.

"I'm not offering any," he laughed, yet stung by her words.

"You're merely insulting me again, I presume?"

"Some young women need punishing. I expect you're one."

She handed him the horsewhip, a sudden pulse of passion beating fiercely in her throat. "Very well. Make an end of it and let me see the last of you," she challenged.

He cracked the lash expertly so that the horses quivered and would have started if his strong hand had not tightened on the lines.

The Westerner laughed again. "You're game anyhow."

"When you are quite through with me," she suggested, very quietly.

But he noticed the fury of her deep-pupiled eyes, the turbulent rise and fall of her bosom.

"I'll not punish you that way this time." And he gave back the whip.

"If you won't use it I will."

The lash flashed up and down, twined itself savagely round his wrist, and left behind a bracelet of crimson. Startled, the horses leaped forward. The reins slipped free from his numbed fingers.

Miss Kinney had made her good-by and was descending swiftly into the valley.

The man watched the rig sweep along that branch of the road which led to the south. Then he looked at his wrist and laughed.

"The plucky little devil! She's a thoroughbred for fair. You bet I'll make her pay for this. But ain't she got sand in her craw? She's surely hating me proper." He laughed again in remembrance of the whole episode, finding in it something that stirred his blood immensely.

After the trap had swept round a curve out of sight he disappeared in the mesquite and bear-grass, presently returning with the roan that had been ridden by the escaped convict.

"Whoever would suppose she was the sister of that scurvy scalawag with jailbird branded all over his hulking hide? He ain't fit to wipe her little feet on. She's as fine as silk. Think of her going through what she is to save that coyote, and him as crooked as a dog's hind leg. There ain't any limit to what a good woman will do for a man when she thinks he's got a claim on her, more especially if he's a ruffian."

With this bit of philosophic observation he rolled a cigarette and lit it.

"Him fall into bad company and be led away?" he added in disgust. "There ain't any worse than him. But he'll work her to the limit before she finds it out."

Leisurely he swung to the saddle and rode down into the valley of the San Xavier, which rolled away from his feet in numberless tawny waves of unfeatured foot-hills and mesas and washes. Almost as far as the eye could see there stretched a sea of hilltops bathed in sun. Only on the west were they bounded, by the irregular saw-toothed edge of the Frenchman Hills, silhouetted against an incomparable blue. For a stretch of many miles the side of the range was painted scarlet by millions of poppies splashed broadcast.

"Nature's gone to flower-gardening for fair on the mountains," murmured the rider. "What with one thing and another I've got a notion I'm going to take a liking to this country."

The roan was plainly very tired with rapid travel, and about the middle of the afternoon the young man unsaddled and picketed the animal near a water-hole. He lay down in the shadow of a cottonwood, flat on his back, face upturned to the deep cobalt sky. Presently the drowse of the afternoon crept over him. The slumberous valley grew hazy to his nodding eyes. The reluctant lids ceased to open and he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER II

LIEUTENANT FRASER INTERFERES.

The sun had declined almost to a saddle in the Cuesta del Burro when the sleeper reopened his eyes. Even before he had shaken himself free of sleep he was uneasily aware of something wrong. Hazily the sound of voices drifted to him across an immense space. Blurred figures crossed before his unfocused gaze.

The first thing he saw clearly was the roan, still grazing in the circle of its picket-rope. Beside the bronco were two men looking the animal over critically.

"Been going some," he heard one remark, pointing at the same time to the sweat-stains that streaked the shoulders and flanks.

"If he had me on his back he'd still be burning the wind, me being in *his* boots," returned the second, with a grating laugh, jerking his head toward the sleeper. "Whatever led the durned fool to stop this side of the line beats me."

"If he was hiking for Chihuahua he's been hitting a mighty crooked trail. I don't savvy it, him

knowing the country as well as they say he does," the first speaker made answer.

The traveler's circling eye now discovered two more men, each of them covering him with a rifle. A voice from the rear assured him there was also a fifth member to the party.

"Look out! He's awake," it warned.

The young man's hand inadvertently moved toward his revolver-butt. This drew a sharp imperative order from one of the men in front.

"Throw up your hands, and damn quick!"

"You seem to have the call, gentlemen," he smiled. "Would you mind telling me what it's all about?"

"You know what it's all about as well as we do. Collect his gun, Tom."

"This hold-up business seems to be a habit in this section. Second time to-day I've been the victim of it," said the victim easily.

"It will be the last," retorted one of the men grimly.

"If you're after the mazuma you've struck a poor bank."

"You've got your nerve," cried one of the men in a rage; and another demanded: "Where did you get that hawss?"

"Why, I got it——" The young man stopped in the middle of his sentence. His jaw clamped and his eyes grew hard. "I expect you better explain what right you got to ask that question."

The man laughed without cordiality. "Seeing as I have owned it three years I allow I have some right."

"What's the use of talking? He's the man we want," broke in another impatiently.

"Who is the man you want?" asked their prisoner.

"*You're* the man we want, Jim Kinney."

"Wrong guess. My name is Larry Neill. I'm from the Panhandle and I've never been in this part of the country till two days ago."

"You may have a dozen names. We don't care what you call yourself. Of course you would deny being the man we're after. But that don't go with us."

"All right. Take me back to Fort Lincoln, or take me to the prison officials. They will tell you whether I am the man."

The leader of the party pounced on his slip. "Who mentioned prison? Who told you we wanted an escaped prisoner?"

"He's give himself away," triumphed the one called Tom. "I guess that clinches it. He's riding Maloney's hawss. He's wounded; so's the man we want. He answers the description—gray eyes, tall, slim, muscular. Same gun—automatic Colt. Tell you there's nothin' to it, Duffield."

"If you're not Kinney, how come you with this hawss? He stole it from a barn in Fort Lincoln

last night. That's known," said the leader, Duffield.

The imperilled man thought of the girl flying toward the border with her brother and the remembrance padlocked his tongue.

"Take me to the proper authorities and I'll answer questions. But I'll not talk here. What's the use? You don't believe a word I say."

"You spoke the truth that time," said one.

"If you ever want to do any explaining now's the hour," added another.

"I'll do mine later, gentlemen."

They looked at each other and one of them spoke.

"It will be too late to explain them."

"Too late?"

Some inkling of the man's hideous meaning seared him and ran like an ice-blast through him.

"You've done all the meanness you'll ever do in this world. Poor Dave Long is the last man you'll ever kill. We're going to do justice right now."

"Dave Long! I never heard of him," the prisoner repeated mechanically. "Good God, do you think I'm a murderer?"

One of the men thrust himself forward. "We know it. Y'u and that hellish partner of yours shot him while he was locking the gate. But y'u made a mistake when y'u come to Fort Lincoln. He lived there before he went to be a guard at the

Arizona penitentiary. I'm his brother. These gentlemen are his neighbors. Y'u're not going back to prison. Y'u're going to stay right here under this cottonwood."

If the extraordinary menace of the man appalled Neill he gave no sign of it. His gray eye passed from one to another of them quietly without giving any sign of the impotent tempest raging within him.

"You're going to lynch me then?"

"Y'u've called the turn."

"Without giving me a chance to prove my innocence?"

"Without giving y'u a chance to escape or sneak back to the penitentiary."

The thing was horribly unthinkable. The warm mellow afternoon sunshine wrapped them about. The horses grazed with quiet unconcern. One of these hard-faced frontiersmen was chewing tobacco with machinelike regularity. Another was rolling a cigarette. There was nothing of dramatic effect. Not a man had raised his voice. But Neill knew there was no appeal. He had come to the end of the passage through a horrible mistake. He raged in bitter resentment against his fate, against these men who stood so quietly about him ready to execute it, most of all against the girl who had let him sacrifice himself by concealing the vital fact that her brother had murdered a guard to effect his es-

cape. Fool that he had been, he had stumbled into a trap, and she had let him do it without a word of warning. Wild, chaotic thoughts crowded his brain furiously.

But the voice with which he addressed them was singularly even and colorless.

"I am a stranger to this country. I was born in Tennessee, brought up in the Panhandle. I'm an irrigation engineer by profession. This is my vacation. I'm headed now for the Mal Pais mines. Friends of mine are interested in a property there with me and I have been sent to look the ground over and make a report. I never heard of Kinney till to-day. You've got the wrong man, gentlemen."

"We'll risk it," laughed one brutally. "Bring that riata, Tom."

Neill did not struggle or cry out frantically. He stood motionless while they adjusted the rope round his bronzed throat. They had judged him for a villain; they should at least know him a man. So he stood there straight and lithe, wide-shouldered and lean-flanked, a man in a thousand. Not a twitch of the well-packed muscles, not a quiver of the eyelash nor a swelling of the throat betrayed any fear. His cool eyes were quiet and steady.

"If you want to leave any message for anybody I'll see it's delivered," promised Duffield.

"I'll not trouble you with any."

"Just as you like."

"He didn't give poor Dave any time for messages," cried Tom Long bitterly.

"That's right," assented another with a curse.

It was plain to the victim they were spurring their nerves to hardihood.

"Who's that?" cried one of the men, pointing to a rider galloping toward them.

The newcomer approached rapidly, covered by their weapons, and flung himself from his pony as he dragged it to a halt beside the group.

"Steve Fraser," cried Duffield in surprise, and added, "He's an officer in the rangers."

"Right, gentlemen. Come to claim my prisoner," said the ranger promptly.

"Y'u can't have him, Steve. We took him and he's got to hang."

The lieutenant of rangers shook his dark curly head.

"Won't do, Duffield. Won't do at all," he said decisively. "You'd ought to know law's on top in Texas these days."

Tom Long shouldered his way to the front. "Law! Where was the law when this ruffian Kinney shot down my poor brother Dave? I guess a rope and a cottonwood's good enough law for him. Anyhow, that's what he gits."

Fraser, hard-packed, lithe, and graceful, laid a friendly hand on the other's shoulder and smiled sunnily at him.

"I know how you feel, Tom. We all thought a heap of Dave and you're his brother. But Dave died for the law. Both you boys have always stood for order. He'd be troubled if he knew you were turned enemy to it on his account."

"I'm for justice, Steve. This skunk deserves death and I'm going to see he gits it."

"No, Tom."

"I say yes. Y'u ain't sitting in this game, Steve."

"I reckon I'll have to take a hand then."

The ranger's voice was soft and drawling, but his eyes were indomitably steady. Throughout the Southwest his reputation for fearlessness was established even among a population singularly courageous. The audacity of his daredevil recklessness was become a proverb.

"We got a full table. Better ride away and forget it," said another.

"That ain't what I'm paid for, Jack," returned Fraser good-naturedly. "Better turn him over to me peaceable, boys. He'll get what's coming to him all right."

"He'll get it now, Steve, without any help of yours. We don't aim to allow any butting in."

"Don't you?"

There was a flash of steel as the ranger dived forward. Next instant he and the prisoner stood with their backs to the cottonwood, a revolver having somehow leaped from its scabbard to his

hand. His hunting-knife had sheared at a stroke the riata round the engineer's neck.

"Take it easy, boys," urged Fraser, still in his gentle drawl, to the astonished vigilantes whom his sudden sally had robbed of their victim. "Think about it twice. We'll all be a long time dead. No use in hurrying the funerals."

Nevertheless he recognized battle as inevitable. Friends of his though they were, he knew these sturdy plainsmen would never submit to be foiled in their purpose by one man. In the momentary silence before the clash the quiet voice of the prisoner made itself heard.

"Just a moment, gentlemen. I don't want you spilling lead over me. I'm the wrong man, and I can prove it if you'll give me time. Here's the key to my room at the hotel in San Antonio. In my suit-case you'll find letters that prove——"

"We don't need them. I've got proof right here," cut in Fraser, remembering.

He slipped a hand into his coat pocket and drew out two photographs. "Boys, here are the pictures and descriptions of the two men that escaped from Yuma the other day. I hadn't had time to see this gentleman before he spoke, being some busy explaining the situation to you, but a blind jackass could see he don't favor either Kinney or Struve. You're sure barking up the wrong tree."

The self-appointed committee for the execution

of justice and the man from the Panhandle looked the prison photographs over blankly. Between the hard, clean-cut face of their prisoner and those that looked at them from the photographs it was impossible to find any resemblance. Duffield handed the prints back with puzzled chagrin.

"I guess you're right, Steve. But I'd like this gentleman to explain how come he to be riding the horse one of these miscreants stole from Maloney's barn last night."

Steve looked at the prisoner. "It's your spiel, friend," he said.

"All right. I'll tell you some facts. Just as I was coming down from the Roskruge range this mo'ning I was held up for my team. One of these fellows—the one called Kinney—had started from Fort Lincoln on this roan here, but he was wounded and broke down. There was some gun-play, and he gave me this scratch on the cheek. The end of it was that he took my team and left me with his worn-out bronc. I plugged on all day with the hawss till about three mebbe, then seeing it was all in I unsaddled and picketed. I lay down and dropped asleep. Next I knew the necktie-party was in session."

"What time was it y'u met this fellow Kinney?" asked Long sharply.

"Must have been about nine or nine-thirty I judge."

"And it's five now. That's eight hours' start, and four more before we can cut his trail on Roskruge. By God, we've lost him!"

"Looks like," agreed another ruefully.

"Make straight for the Arivaca cut-off and you ought to stand a show," suggested Fraser.

"That's right. If we ride all night, might beat him to it." Each of the five contributed a word of agreement.

Five minutes later the Texan and the ranger watched a dust-cloud drifting to the south. In it was hidden the posse disappearing over the hilltop.

Steve grinned. "I hate to disappoint the boys. They're so plumb anxious. But I reckon I'll strike the telephone line and send word to Moreno for one of the rangers to cut out after Kinney. Going my way, seh?"

"If you're going mine."

"I reckon I am. And just to pass the time you might tell me the real story of that hold-up while we ride."

"The real story?"

"Well, I don't aim to doubt your word, but I reckon you forgot to tell some of it." He turned on the other his gay smile. "For instance, seh, you ain't asking me to believe that you handed over your rig to Kinney so peaceful and that he went away and clean forgot to unload from you that gun you pack."

The eyes of the two met and looked into each

other's as clear and straight as Texas sunshine. Slowly Neill's relaxed into a smile.

"No, I won't ask you to believe that. I owe you something because you saved my life——"

"Forget it," commanded the lieutenant crisply.

"And I can't do less than tell you the whole story."

He told it, yet not the whole of it either; for there was one detail he omitted completely. It had to do with the cause for existence of the little black-and-blue bruise under his right eye and the purple ridge that seamed his wrist. Nor with all his acuteness could Stephen Fraser guess that the one swelling had been made by a gold ring on the clenched fist of an angry girl held tight in Larry Neill's arms, the other by the lash of a horsewhip wielded by the same young woman.

CHAPTER III

A DISCOVERY

The roan, having been much refreshed by a few hours on grass, proved to be a good traveller. The two men took a road-gait and held it steadily till they reached a telephone-line which stretched across the desert and joined two outposts of civilization. Steve strapped on his climbing spurs and went up a post lightly with his test outfit. In a few minutes he had Moreno on the wire and was in touch with one of his rangers.

"Hello! This you, Ferguson? This is Fraser. No, Fraser—Lieutenant Fraser. Yes. How many of the boys can you get in touch with right away? Two? Good. I want you to cover the Arivaca cut-off. Kinney is headed that way in a rig. His sister is with him. She is not to be injured under any circumstances. Understand? Wire me at the Mal Pais mines to-morrow your news. By the way, Tom Long and some of the boys are headed down that way with notions of lynching Kinney. Dodge them if you can and rush your man up to the Mal Pais. Good-bye."

"Suppose they can't dodge them?" ventured Neill after Steve had rejoined him.

"I reckon they can. If not—well, my rangers are good boys; I expect they won't give up a prisoner."

"I'm right glad to find you are going to the Mal Pais mines with me, lieutenant. I wasn't expecting company on the way."

"I'll bet a dollar Mex against two plunks gold that you're wondering whyfor I'm going."

Larry laughed. "You're right. I *was* wondering."

"Well, then, it's this way. What with all these boys on Kinney's trail he's as good as rounded up. Fact is, Kinney's only a weak sister anyhow. He turned State's witness at the trial, and it was his testimony that convicted Struve. I know something about this because I happened to be the man that caught Struve. I had just joined the rangers. It was my first assignment. The other three got away. Two of them escaped and the third was not tried for lack of sufficient evidence. Now, then: Kinney rides the rods from Yuma to Marfa and is now or had ought to be somewhere in this valley between Posa Buena and Taylor's ranch. But where is Struve, the hardier ruffian of the two? He ain't been seen since they broke out. He sure never reached Ft. Lincoln. My notion is that he dropped off the train in the darkness about Casa Grande, then rolled his tail for the Mal Pais country. Your eyes are asking whys mighty loud, my friend; and my

answer is that there's a man up there mebbe who has *got* to hide Struve if he shows up. That's only a guess, but it looks good to me. This man was the brains of the whole outfit, and folks say that he's got cached the whole haul the gang made from that S. P. hold-up. What's more, he scattered gold so liberal that his name wasn't even mentioned at the trial. He's a big man now, a millionaire copper king and into gold-mines up to the hocks. In the Southwest those things happen. It doesn't always do to look too closely at a man's past.

"We'll say Struve drops in on him and threatens to squeal. Mebbe he has got evidence; mebbe he hasn't. Anyhow, our big duck wants to forget the time he was wearing a mask and bending a six-gun for a living. Also and moreover, he's right anxious to have other folks get a chance to forget. From what I can hear he's clean mashed on some girl at Amarillo, or maybe it's Fort Lincoln. See what a twist Struve's got on him if he can slip into the Mal Pais country on the q. t."

"And you're going up there to look out for him?"

"I'm going in to take a casual look around. There's no telling what a man might happen onto accidentally if he travels with his ear to the ground."

The other nodded. He could now understand easily why Fraser was going into the Mal Pais country, but he could not make out why the ranger, naturally a man who lived under his own hat and

kept his own counsel, had told him so much as he had. The officer shortly relieved his mind on this point.

"I may need help while I'm there. May I call on you if I do, seh?"

Neill felt his heart warm toward this hard-faced, genial frontiersman, who knew how to judge so well the timbre of a casual acquaintance.

"You sure may, lieutenant."

"Good. I'll count on you then."

So, in these few words, the compact of friendship and alliance was sealed between them. Each of them was strangely taken with the other, but it is not the way of the Anglo-Saxon fighting man to voice his sentiment. Though each of them admired the stark courage and the flawless fortitude he knew to dwell in the other, impassivity sat on their faces like an ice-mask. For this is the hall-mark of the Southwest, that a man must love and hate with the same unchanging face of iron, save only when a woman is in consideration.

They were to camp that night by Cottonwood Spring, and darkness caught them still some miles from their camp. They were on no road, but were travelling across country through washes and over countless hills. The ranger led the way, true as an arrow, even after velvet night had enveloped them.

"It must be right over this mesa among the cottonwoods you see rising from that arroyo," he announced at last.

He had scarcely spoken before they struck a trail that led them direct to the spring. But as they were descending this in a circle Fraser's horse shied.

"Hyer you, Pinto! What's the matter with——"

The ranger cut his sentence in two and slid from the saddle. When his companion reached him and drew rein the ranger was bending over a dark mass stretched across the trail. He looked up quietly.

"Man's body," he said briefly.

"Dead?"

"Yes."

Neill dismounted and came forward. The moon-crescent was up by now and had lit the country with a chill radiance. The figure was dressed in the coarse striped suit of a convict.

"I don't savvy this play," Fraser confessed softly to himself.

"Do you know him?"

"Suppose you look at him and see if *you* know him."

Neill looked into the white face and shook his head.

"No, I don't know him, but I suppose it is Struve."

From his pocket the ranger produced a photograph and handed it to him.

"Hyer, I'll strike a match and you'll see better."

The match flared up in the slight breeze and presently went out, but not before Neill had seen that it was the face of the man who lay before them.

"Did you see the name under the picture, seh?"

"No."

Another match flared and the man from the Panhandle read a name, but it was not the one he had expected to see. The words printed there were "James Kinney."

"I don't understand. This ain't Kinney. He is a heavy-set man with a villainous face. There's some mistake."

"There ce'tainly is, but not at this end of the line. This is Kinney all right. I've seen him at Yuma. He was heading for the Mal Pais country and he died on the way. See hyer. Look at these soaked bandages. He's been wounded—shot mebbe—and the wound broke out on him again so that he bled to death."

"It's all a daze to me. Who is the other man if he isn't Kinney?"

"We're coming to that. I'm beginning to see daylight," said Steve, gently. "Let's run over this thing the way it might be. You've got to keep in mind that this man was weak, one of those spineless fellows that stronger folks lead around by the nose. Well, they make their getaway at Yuma after Struve has killed a guard. That killing of Dave Long shakes Kinney up a lot, he being no desperado but only a poor lost-dog kind of a guy. Struve notices it and remembers that this fellow weakened before. He makes up his mind to take no chances. From that moment he watches for a chance to make

an end of his pardner. At Casa Grande they drop off the train they're riding and cut across country toward the Mal Pais. Mebbe they quarrel or mebbe Struve gets his chance and takes it. But after he has shot his man he sees he has made a mistake. Perhaps they were seen travelling in that direction. Anyhow, he is afraid the body will be found since he can't bury it right. He changes his plan and takes a big chance; cuts back to the track, boards a freight, and reaches Fort Lincoln."

"My God!" cried the other, startled for once out of his calm.

The officer nodded. "You're on the trail right enough. I wish we were both wrong, but we ain't."

"But surely she would have known he wasn't her brother, surely——"

The ranger shook his head. "She hadn't seen the black sheep since she was a kid of about seven. How would she know what he looked like? And Struve was primed with all the facts he had heard Kinney blat out time and again. She wasn't suspecting any imposition and he worked her to a fare-you-well."

Larry Neill set his teeth on a wave of icy despair.

"And she's in that devil's power. She would be as safe in a den of rattlers. To think that I had my foot on his neck this mo'ning and didn't break it."

"She's safe so long as she is necessary to him. She's in deadly peril as soon as he finds her one wit-

ness too many. If he walks into my boys' trap at the Arivaca cut-off, all right. If not, God help her! I've shut the door to Mexico and safety in his face. He'll strike back for the Mal Pais country. It's his one chance, and *he'll want to travel light and fast.*"

"If he starts back Tom Long's party may get him."

"That's one more chance for her, but it's a slim one. He'll cut straight across country; they're following the trail. No, seh, our best bet is my rangers. They'd ought to land him, too."

"Oh, ought to," derided the other impatiently. "Point is, if they don't. How are we going to save her? You know this country. I don't."

"Don't tear your shirt, *amigo,*" smiled the ranger. "We'll arrive faster if we don't go off half-cocked. Let's picket the broncs, amble down to the spring, and smoke a cigaret. We've got to ride twenty miles for fresh hawsses and these have got to have a little rest."

They unsaddled and picketed, then strolled to the spring.

"I've been thinking that maybe we have made a mistake. Isn't it possible the man with Miss Kinney is not Struve?" asked Neill.

"That's easy proved. You saw him this mo'ning." The lieutenant went down into his pocket once more for a photograph. "Does this favor the man with Miss Kinney?"

Under the blaze of another match, shielded by

the ranger's hands, Larry looked into the scowling, villainous face he had seen earlier in the day. There could be no mistaking those leering, cruel eyes nor the ratlike, shifty look of the face, not to mention the long scar across it. His heart sank.

"It's the man."

"Don't you blame yourself for not putting his lights out. How could you tell who he was?"

"I knew he was a ruffian, hide and hair."

"But you thought he was her brother and that's a whole lot different. What do you say to grubbing here? We've got to go to the Halle ranch for hawsses and it's a long jog."

They lit a fire and over their coffee discussed plans. In the midst of these the Southerner picked up idly a piece of wrapping-paper. Upon it was pencilled a wavering scrawl:

Bleeding has broke out again. Can't stop it. Struve shot me and left me for dead ten miles back. I didn't kill the guard or know he meant to. J. KINNEY.

Neill handed the paper to the ranger, who read it through, folded it, and gave it back to the other.

"Keep that paper. We may need it." His grave eyes went up the trail to where the dark figure lay motionless in the cold moonlight. "Well, he's come to the end of the trail—the only end he could have reached. He wasn't strong enough to survive as a bad man. Poor devil!"

They buried him in a clump of cottonwoods and left a little pile of rocks to mark the spot.

CHAPTER IV

LOST!

After her precipitate leave-taking of the man whose team she had bought or borrowed, Margaret Kinney nursed the fires of her indignation in silence, banking them for future use against the time when she should meet him again in the event that should ever happen. She brought her whip-lash snapping above the backs of the horses, and there was that in the supple motion of the small strong wrist which suggested that nothing would have pleased her more than having this audacious Texan there in place of the innocent animals. For whatever of inherited savagery lay latent in her blood had been flogged to the surface by the circumstances into which she had been thrust. Never in all her placid life had she known the tug of passion any closer than from across the footlights of a theatre.

She had had, to be sure, one stinging shame, but it had been buried in far-away Arizona, quite beyond the ken of the convention-bound people of the little Wisconsin town where she dwelt. But within the past twelve hours Fate had taken hold of her with both hands and thrust her into Life. She

sensed for the first time its roughness, its nakedness, its tragedy. She had known the sensations of a hunted wild beast, the flush of shame for her kinship to this coarse ruffian by her side, and the shock of outraged maiden modesty at kisses ravished from her by force. The teacher hardly knew herself for the same young woman who but yesterday was engrossed in multiplication tables and third readers.

A sinister laugh from the man beside her brought the girl back to the present.

She looked at him and then looked quickly away again. There was something absolutely repulsive in the creature—in the big ears that stood out from the close-cropped head, in the fishy eyes that saw everything without ever looking directly at anything, in the crooked mouth with its irregular rows of stained teeth from which several were missing. She had often wondered about her brother, but never at the worst had she imagined anything so bad as this. The memory would be enough to give one the shudders for years.

"Guess I ain't next to all that happened there in the mesquite," he sneered, with a lift of the ugly lip.

She did not look at him. She did not speak. There seethed in her a loathing and a disgust beyond expression.

"Guess you forgot that a fellow can sometimes hear even when he can't see. Since I'm chaperooning you I'll make out to be there next time you meet a good-looking lady-killer. Funny, the difference

it makes, being your brother. You ain't seen me since you was a kid, but you plumb forgot to kiss *me.*"

There was a note in his voice she had not heard before, some hint of leering ribaldry in the thick laugh that for the first time stirred unease in her heart. She did not know that the desperate, wild-animal fear in him, so overpowering that everything else had been pushed to the background, had obscured certain phases of him that made her presence here such a danger as she could not yet conceive. That fear was now lifting, and the peril loomed imminent.

He put his arm along the back of the seat and grinned at her from his loose-lipped mouth.

"But o' course it ain't too late to begin now, my dearie."

Her fearless level eyes met squarely his shifty ones and read there something she could dread without understanding, something that was an undefined sacrilege of her sweet purity. For womanlike her instinct leaped beyond reason.

"Take down your arm," she ordered.

"Oh, I don't know, sis. I reckon your brother——"

"You're no brother of mine," she broke in. "At most it is an accident of birth I disown. I'll have no relationshiip with you of any sort."

"Is that why you're driving with me to Mexico?" he jeered.

"I made a mistake in trying to save you. If it were to do over again I should not lift a hand."

"You wouldn't, eh?"

There was something almost wolfish in the facial malignity that distorted him.

"Not a finger."

"Perhaps you'd give me up now if you had a chance?"

"I would if I did what was right."

"And you'd sure want to do what was right," he snarled.

"Take down your arm," she ordered again, a dangerous glitter in her eyes.

He thrust his evil face close to hers and showed his teeth in a blind rage that forgot everything else.

"Listen here, you little locoed baby. I got something to tell you that'll make your hair curl. You're right, I ain't your brother. I'm Nick Struve—Wolf Struve if you like that better. I lied you into believing me your brother, who ain't ever been anything but a skim-milk quitter. He's dead back there in the cactus somewhere, and I killed him!"

Terror flooded her eyes. Her very breathing hung suspended. She gazed at him in a frozen fascination of horror.

"Killed him because he gave me away seven years ago and was gittin' ready to round on me again. Folks don't live long that play Wolf Struve for a lamb. A wolf! That's what I am, a born wolf, and don't you forget it."

The fact itself did not need his words for emphasis. He fairly reeked the beast of prey. She had to nerve herself against faintness. She must not swoon. She dared not.

"Think you can threaten to give *me* up, do you? 'Fore I'm through with you you'll wish you had never been born. You'll crawl on your knees and beg me to kill you."

Such a devil of wickedness she had never seen in human eyes before. The ruthlessness left no room for appeal. Unless the courage to tame him lay in her she was lost utterly.

He continued his exultant bragging, blatantly, ferociously.

"I didn't tell you about my escape; how a guard tried to stop me and I put the son of a gun out of business. There's a price on my head. D'ye think I'm the man to give you a chance to squeal on me? D'ye think I'll let a pink-and-white chit send me back to be strangled?" he screamed.

The stark courage in her rose to the crisis. Not an hour before she had seen the Texan cow him. He was of the kind would take the whip whiningly could she but wield it. Her scornful eyes fastened on him contemptuously, chiseled into the cur heart of him.

"What will you do?" she demanded, fronting the issue that must sooner or later rise.

The raucous jangle of his laugh failed to disturb the steadiness of her gaze. To reassure himself of

his mastery he began to bluster, to threaten, turning loose such a storm of vile abuse as she had never heard. He was plainly working his nerve up to the necessary pitch.

In her first terror she had dropped the reins. Her hands had slipped unconsciously under the lap-robe. Now one of them touched something chilly on the seat beside her. She almost gasped her relief. It was the selfsame revolver with which she had tried to hold up the Texan.

In the midst of Struve's flood of invective the girl's hand leaped quickly from the lap-robe. A cold muzzle pressed against his cheek brought the convict's outburst to an abrupt close.

"If you move I'll fire," she said quietly.

For a long moment their gazes gripped, the deadly clear eyes of the young woman and the furtive ones of the miscreant. Underneath the robe she felt a stealthy movement, and cried out quickly: "Hands up!"

With a curse he threw his arms into the air.

"Jump out! Don't lower your hands!"

"My ankle," he whined.

"Jump!"

His leap cleared the wheel and threw him to the ground. She caught up the whip and slashed wildly at the horses. They sprang forward in a panic, flying wildly across the open plain. Margaret heard a revolver bark twice. After that she was so busy

trying to regain control of the team that she could think of nothing else. The horses were young and full of spirit, so that she had all she could do to keep the trap from being upset. It wound in and out among the hills, taking perilous places safely to her surprise, and was at last brought to a stop only by the narrowing of a draw into which the animals had bolted.

They were quiet now beyond any chance of farther runaway, even had it been possible. Margaret dropped the lines on the dashboard and began to sob, at first in slow deep breaths and then in quicker uneven ones. Plucky as she was, the girl had had about all her nerves could stand for one day. The strain of her preparation for flight, the long night drive, and the excitement of the last two hours were telling on her in a hysterical reaction.

She wept herself out, dried her eyes with dabs of her little kerchief, and came back to a calm consideration of her situation. She must get back to Fort Lincoln as soon as possible, and she must do it without encountering the convict. For in the course of the runaway the revolver had been jolted from the trap.

Not quite sure in which direction lay the road, she got out from the trap, topped the hill to her right, and looked around. She saw in all directions nothing but rolling hilltops, merging into each other even to the horizon's edge. In her wild flight

among these hills she had lost count of direction. She had not yet learned how to know north from south by the sun, and if she had it would have helped but little since she knew only vaguely the general line of their travel.

She felt sure that from the top of the next rise she could locate the road, but once there she was as uncertain as before. Before giving up she breasted a third hill to the summit. Still no signs of the road. Reluctantly she retraced her steps, and at the foot of the hill was uncertain whether she should turn to right or left. Choosing the left, from the next height she could see nothing of the team. She was not yet alarmed. It was ridiculous to suppose that she was lost. How could she be when she was within three or four hundred yards of the rig? She would cut across the shoulder into the wash and climb the hillock beyond. For behind it the team must certainly be.

But at her journey's end her eyes were gladdened by no sight of the horses. Every draw was like its neighbor, every rolling rise a replica of the next. The truth came home to a sinking heart. She was lost in one of the great deserts of Texas. She would wander for days as others had, and she would die in the end of starvation and thirst. Nobody would know where to look for her, since she had told none where she was going. Only yesterday at her boarding-house she had heard a young man tell

how a tenderfoot had been found dead after he had wandered round and round in intersecting circles. She sank down and gave herself up to despair.

But not for long. She was too full of grit to give up without a long fight. How many hours she wandered Margaret Kinney did not know. The sun was high in the heavens when she began. It had given place to flooding moonlight long before her worn feet and aching heart gave up the search for some human landmark. Once at least she must have slept, for she stared up from a spot where she had sunk down to look up into a starry sky that was new to her.

The moon had sailed across the vault and grown chill and faint with dawn before she gave up, completely exhausted, and when her eyes opened again it was upon a young day fresh and sweet. She knew by this time hunger and an acute thirst. As the day increased, this last she knew must be a torment of swollen tongue and lime-kiln throat. Yesterday she had cried for help till her voice had failed. A dumb despair had now driven away her terror.

And then into the awful silence leaped a sound like a messenger of hope. It was a shot, so close that she could see the smoke rise from an arroyo near. She ran forward till she could look down into it and caught sight of a man with a dead bird in his hand. He had his back toward her and was

stooping over a fire. Slithering down over the short dry grass, she was upon him almost before she could stop.

"I've been lost all night and all yesterday," she sobbed.

He snatched at the revolver lying beside him and whirled like a flash as if to meet an attack. The girl's pumping heart seemed to stand still. The man snarling at her was the convict Struve.

CHAPTER V

LARRY NEILL TO THE RESCUE

The snarl gave way slowly to a grin more malign than his open hostility.

"So you've been lost! And now you're found—come safe back to your loving brother. Ain't that luck for you? Hunted all over Texas till you found him, eh? And it's a powerful big State, too."

She caught sight of something that made her forget all else.

"Have you got water in that canteen?" she asked, her parched eyes staring at it.

"Yes, dearie."

"Give it me."

He squatted tailor-fashion on the ground, put the canteen between his knees, and showed his teeth in a crooked grin.

"Thirsty?"

"I'm dying for a drink."

"You look like a right lively corpse."

"Give it to me."

"Will you take it now or wait till you get it?"

"My throat's baked. I want water," she said hoarsely.

"Most folks want a lot they never get."

She walked toward him with her hand outstretched.

"I tell you I've got to have it."

He laughed evilly. "Water's at a premium right now. Likely there ain't enough here to get us both out of this infernal hole alive. Yes, it's sure at a premium."

He let his eye drift insolently over her and take stock of his prey, in the same feline way of a cat with a mouse, gloating over her distress and the details of her young good looks. His tainted gaze got the faint pure touch of color in her face, the reddish tinge of her wavy brown hair, the desirable sweetness of her rounded maidenhood. If her step dragged, if dusky hollows shadowed her lids, if the native courage had been washed from the hopeless eyes, there was no spring of manliness hid deep within him that rose to refresh her exhaustion. No pity or compunction stirred at her sweet helplessness.

"Do you want my money?" she asked wearily.

"I'll take that to begin with."

She tossed him her purse. "There should be seventy dollars there. May I have a drink now?"

"Not yet, my dear. First you got to come up to me and put your arms round——"

He broke off with a curse, for she was flying toward the little circle of cottonwoods some forty

yards away. She had caught a glimpse of the water-hole and was speeding for it.

"Come back here," he called, and in a rage let fly a bullet after her.

She paid no heed, did not stop till she reached the spring and threw herself down full length tc drink, to lave her burnt face, to drink again of the alkali brackish water that trickled down her throat like nectar incomparably delicious.

She was just rising to her feet when Struve hobbled up.

"Don't you think you can play with me, missie. When I give the word you stop in your tracks, and when I say 'Jump!' step lively."

She did not answer. Her head was lifted in a listening attitude, as if to catch some sound that came faintly to her from a distance.

"You're mine, my beauty, to do with as I please, and don't you forget it."

She did not hear him. Her ears were attuned to voices floating to her across the desert. Of course she was beginning to wander in her mind. She knew that. There could be no other human beings in this sea of loneliness. They were alone; just they two, the degenerate ruffian and his victim. Still, it was strange. She certainly had imagined the murmur of people talking. It must be the beginning of delirium.

"Do you hear me?" screamed Struve, striking her

on the cheek with his fist. "I'm your master and you're my squaw."

She did not cringe as he had expected, nor did she show fight. Indeed the knowledge of the blow seemed scarcely to have penetrated her mental penumbra. She still had that strange waiting aspect, but her eyes were beginning to light with newborn hope. Something in her manner shook the man's confidence; a dawning fear swept away his bluster. He, too, was now listening intently.

Again the low murmur, beyond a possibility of doubt. Both of them caught it. The girl opened her throat in a loud cry for help. An answering shout came back clear and strong. Struve wheeled and started up the arroyo, bending in and out among the cactus till he disappeared over the brow.

Two horsemen burst into sight, galloping down the steep trail at breakneck speed, flinging down a small avalanche of shale with them. One of them caught sight of the girl, drew up so short that his horse slid to its haunches, and leaped from the saddle in a cloud of dust.

He ran toward her, and she to him, hands out to meet her rescuer.

"Why didn't you come sooner? I've waited so long," she cried pathetically, as his arms went about her.

"You poor lamb! Thank God we're in time!" was all he could say.

Then for the first time in her life she fainted.

The other rider lounged forward, a hat in his hand that he had just picked up close to the fire.

"We seem to have stampeded part of this camping party. I'll just take a run up this hill and see if I can't find the missing section and persuade it to stay a while. I don't reckon you need me hyer, do you?" he grinned, with a glance at Neill and his burden.

"All right. You'll find me here when you get back, Fraser," the other answered.

Larry carried the girl to the water-hole and set her down beside it. He sprinkled her face with water, and presently her lids trembled and fluttered open. She lay there with her head on his arm and looked at him quite without surprise.

"How did you find me?"

"Mainly luck. We followed your trail to where we found the rig. After that it was guessing where the needle was in the haystack. It just happened we were cutting across country to water when we heard a shot."

"That must have been when he fired at me," she said.

"My God! Did he shoot at you?"

"Yes. Where is he now?" She shuddered.

"Cutting over the hills with Steve after him."

"Steve?"

"My friend, Lieutenant Fraser. He is an officer in the ranger force."

"Oh!" She relapsed into a momentary silence

before she said: "He isn't my brother at all. He is a murderer." She gave a sudden little moan of pain as memory pierced her of what he had said. "He bragged to me that he had killed my brother. He meant to kill me, I think."

"Sho! It doesn't matter what the coyote meant. It's all over now. You're with friends."

A warm smile lit his steel-blue eyes, softened the lines of his lean, hard face. Never had shipwrecked mariner come to safer harbor than she. She knew that this slim, sun-bronzed Westerner was a man's man, that strength and nerve inhabited his sinewy frame. He would fight for her because she was a woman as long as he could stand and see.

A touch of color washed back into her cheeks, a glow of courage into her heart. "Yes, it's all over. The weary, weary hours—and the fear—and the pain—and the dreadful thirst—and worst of all, him!"

She began to cry softly, hiding her face in his coat-sleeve.

"I'm crying because—it's all over. I'm a little fool, just as—as you said I was."

"I didn't know you then," he smiled. "I'm right likely to make snap-shot judgments that are 'way off."

"You knew me well enough to——" She broke off in the middle, bathed in a flush of remembrance that brought her coppery head up from his arm instantly.

"Be careful. You're dizzy yet."

"I'm all right now, thank you," she answered, her embarrassed profile haughtily in the air. "But I'm ravenous for something to eat. It's been twenty-four hours since I've had a bite. That's why I'm weepy and faint. I should think you might make a snap-shot judgment that breakfast wouldn't hurt me."

He jumped up contritely. "That's right. What a goat I am!"

His long, clean stride carried him over the distance that separated him from his bronco. Out of the saddle-bags he drew some sandwiches wrapped in a newspaper.

"Here, Miss Margaret! You begin on these. I'll have coffee ready in two shakes of a cow's tail. And what do you say to bacon?"

He understood her to remark from the depths of a sandwich that she said "Amen!" to it, and that she would take everything he had and as soon as he could get it ready. She was as good as her word. He found no cause to complain of her appetite. Bacon and sandwiches and coffee were all consumed in quantities reasonable for a famished girl who had been tramping actively for a day and a night, and, since she was a child of impulse, she turned more friendly eyes on him who had appeased her appetite.

"I suppose you are a cowboy like everybody else in this country?" she ventured amiably after her hunger had become less sharp.

"No, I belong to the government reclamation service."

"Oh!" She had a vague idea she had heard of it before. "Who is it you reclaim? Indians, I suppose."

"We reclaim young ladies when we find them wandering about the desert," he smiled.

"Is that what the government pays you for?"

"Not entirely. Part of the time I examine irrigation projects and report on their feasibility. I have been known to build dams and bore tunnels."

"And what of the young ladies you reclaim? Do you bore them?" she asked saucily.

"I understand they have hitherto always found me very entertaining," he claimed boldly, his smiling eyes on her.

"Indeed!"

"But young ladies are peculiar. Sometimes we think we're entertaining them when we ain't."

"I'm sure you are right."

"And other times they're interested when they pretend they're not."

"It must be comforting to your vanity to think that," she said coldly. For his words had recalled similar ones spoken by him twenty-four hours earlier, which in turn had recalled his unpardonable sin.

The lieutenant of rangers appeared over the hill and descended into the draw. Miss Kinney went to meet him.

"He got away?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I lost him in some of these hollows, or rather I never found him. I'm going to take my hawss and swing round in a circle."

"What are you going to do with me?" she smiled.

"I been thinking that the best thing would be for you to go to the Mal Pais mines with Mr. Neill."

"Who is Mr. Neill?"

"The gentleman over there by the fire."

"Must I go with him? I should feel safer in your company, lieutenant."

"You'll be safe enough in his, Miss Kinney."

"You know me then?" she asked.

"I've seen you at Fort Lincoln. You were pointed out to me once as a new teacher."

"But I don't want to go to the Mal Pais mines. I want to go to Fort Lincoln. As to this gentleman, I have no claims on him and shall not trouble him to burden himself with me."

Steve laughed. "I don't reckon he would think it a terrible burden, ma'am. And about the Mal Pais—this is how it is. Fort Lincoln is all of sixty miles from here as the crow flies. The mines are about seventeen. My notion was you could get there and take the stage to-morrow to your town."

"What shall I do for a horse?"

"I expect Mr. Neill will let you ride his. He can walk beside the hawss."

"That won't do at all. Why should I put him to that inconvenience? I'll walk myself."

The ranger flashed his friendly smile at her. He had an instinct that served him with women. "Any way that suits you and him suits me. I'm right sorry that I've got to leave you and take out after that hound Struve, but you may take my word for it that this gentleman will look after you all right and bring you safe to the Mal Pais."

"He is a stranger to me. I've only met him once and on that occasion not pleasantly. I don't like to put myself under an obligation to him. But of course if I must I must."

"That's the right sensible way to look at it. In this little old world we got to do a heap we don't want to do. For instance, I'd rather see you to the Mal Pais than hike over the hills after this fellow," he concluded gallantly.

Neill, who had been packing the coffee-pot and the frying-pan, now sauntered forward with his horse.

"Well, what's the program?" he wanted to know.

"It's you and Miss Kinney for the Mal Pais, me for the trail. I ain't very likely to find Mr. Struve, but you can't always sometimes tell. Anyhow, I'm going to take a shot at it," the ranger answered.

"And at him?" his friend suggested.

"Oh, I reckon not. He may be a sure-enough wolf, but I expect this ain't his day to howl."

Steve whistled to his pony, swung to the saddle when it trotted up, and waved his hat in farewell.

His "Adios!" drifted back to them from the crown of the hill just before he disappeared over its edge.

CHAPTER VI

"SOMEBODY'S ACTING MIGHTY FOOLISH."

Larry Neill watched him vanish and then turned smiling to Miss Kinney.

"All aboard for the Mal Pais," he sang out cheerfully.

Too cheerfully perhaps. His assurance that all was well between them chilled her manner. He might forgive himself easily if he was that sort of man; she would at least show him she was no party to it. He had treated her outrageously, had manhandled her with deliberate intent to insult. She would show him no one alive could treat her so and calmly assume to her that it was all right.

Her cool eyes examined the horse, and him.

"I don't quite see how you expect to arrange it, Mr. Neill. That *is* your name, isn't it?" she added indifferently.

"That's my name—Larry Neill. Easiest thing in the world to arrange. We ride pillion if it suits you; if not, I'll walk."

"Neither plan suits me," she announced curtly, her gaze on the far-away hills.

He glanced at her in quick surprise, then made the mistake of letting himself smile at her frosty aloofness instead of being crestfallen by it. She happened to look round and catch that smile before he could extinguish it. Her petulance hardened instantly to a resolution.

"I don't quite know what we're going to do about it—unless *you* walk," he proposed, amused at the absurdity of his suggestion.

"That's just what I'm going to do," she retorted promptly.

"What!" He wheeled on her with an astonished smile on his face.

This served merely to irritate her.

"I said I was going to walk."

"Walk seventeen miles?"

"Seventy if I choose."

"Nonsense! Of course you won't."

Her eyebrows lifted in ironic demurrer. "I think you must let me be the judge of that," she said gently.

"Walk!" he reiterated. "Why, you're walked out. You couldn't go a mile. What do you take me for? Think I'm going to let you come that on me."

"I don't quite see how you can help it, Mr. Neill," she answered.

"Help it! Why, it ain't reasonable. Of course you'll ride."

"Of course I won't."

She set off briskly, almost jauntily, despite her tired feet and aching limbs.

"Well, if that don't beat——" He broke off to laugh at the situation. After she had gone twenty steps he called after her in a voice that did not suppress its chuckle: "You ain't going the right direction, Miss Kinney."

She whirled round on him in anger. How dared he laugh at her?

"Which *is* the right way?" she choked.

"North by west is about it."

She was almost reduced to stamping her foot.

Without condescending to ask more definite instructions she struck off at haphazard, and by chance guessed right. There was nothing for it but to pursue. Wherefore the man pursued. The horse at his heels hampered his stride, but he caught up with her soon.

"Somebody's acting mighty foolish," he said.

She said nothing very eloquently.

"If I need punishing, ma'am, don't punish yourself, but me. You ain't able to walk and that's a fact."

She gave her silent attention strictly to the business of making progress through the cactus and the sand.

"Say I'm all you think I am. You can trample on me proper after we get to the Mal Pais. Don't have to know me at all if you don't want to. Won't you ride, ma'am? Please!"

His distress filled her with a fierce delight. She stumbled defiantly forward.

He pondered a while before he asked quietly:

"Ain't you going to ride, Miss Kinney?"

"No, I'm not. Better go on. Pray don't let me detain you."

"All right. See that peak with the spur to it? Well, you keep that directly in line and make straight for it. I'll say good-by now, ma'am. I got to hurry to be in time for dinner. I'll send some one out from the camp to meet you that ain't such a villain as I am."

He swung to the saddle, put spurs to his pony, and cantered away. She could scarce believe it, even when he rode straight over the hill without a backward glance. He would never leave her. Surely he would not do that. She could never reach the camp, and he knew it. To be left alone in the desert again; the horror of it broke her down. but not immediately. She went proudly forward with her head in the air at first. He might look round. Perhaps he was peeping at her from behind some *cholla.* She would not gratify him by showing any interest in his whereabouts. But presently she began to lag, to scan draws and mesas anxiously for him, even to call aloud in an ineffective little voice which the empty hills echoed faintly. But from him there came no answer.

She sat down and wept in self-pity. Of course she had told him to go, but he knew well enough

she did not mean it. A magnanimous man would have taken a better revenge on an exhausted girl than to leave her alone in such a spot, and after she had endured such a terrible experience as she had. She had read about the chivalry of Western men. Yet these two had ridden away on their horses and left her to live or die as chance willed it.

"Now, don't you feel so bad, Miss Margaret. I wasn't aiming really to leave you, of course," a voice interrupted her sobs to say.

She looked through the laced fingers that covered her face, mightily relieved, but not yet willing to confess it. The engineer had made a circuit and stolen up quietly behind.

"Oh! I thought you had gone," she said as carelessly as she could with a voice not clear of tears.

"Were you crying because you were afraid I hadn't?" he asked.

"I ran a cactus into my foot. And I didn't say anything about crying."

"Then if your foot is hurt you will want to ride. That seventeen miles might be too long a stroll before you get through with it."

"I don't know what I'll do yet," she answered shortly.

"I know what you'll do."

"Yes?"

"You'll quit your foolishness and get on this hawss."

She flushed angrily. "I won't!"

He stooped down, gathered her up in his arms, and lifted her to the saddle.

"That's what you're going to do whether you like it or not," he informed her.

"How are you going to make me stay here, now you have put me here?"

"I'm going to get on behind and hold you if it's necessary."

He was sensible enough of the folly of it all, but he did not see what else he could do. She had chosen to punish him through herself in a way that was impossible. It was a childish thing to do, born of some touch of hysteria her experience had induced, and he could only treat her as a child till she was safely back in civilization.

Their wills met in their eyes, and the man's, masculine and dominant, won the battle. The long fringe of hers fell to the soft cheeks.

"It won't be at all necessary," she promised.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"That's the way to talk."

"If you care to know," she boiled over, "I think you the most hateful man I ever met."

"That's all right," he grinned ruefully. "You're the most contrairy woman *I* ever bumped into so I reckon honors are easy."

He strode along beside the horse, mile after mile, in a silence which neither of them cared to break. The sap of youth flowed free in him, was in his

elastic tread, in the set of his broad shoulders, in the carriage of his small, well-shaped head. He was as lean-loined and lithe as a panther, and his stride ate up the miles as easily.

They nooned at a spring in the dry wash of Bronco Creek. After he had unsaddled and picketed he condescended to explain to her.

"We'll stay here three hours or mebbe four through the heat of the day."

"Is it far now?" she asked wearily.

"Not more than seven miles I should judge. Are you about all in?"

"Oh, no! I'm all right, thank you," she said, with forced sprightliness.

His shrewd, hard gaze went over her and knew better.

"You lie down under those live-oaks and I'll get some grub ready."

"I'll cook lunch while you lie down. You must be tired walking so far through the sun," said Miss Kinney.

"Have I got to pick you up again and carry you there?"

"No, you haven't. You keep your hands off me," she flashed.

But nevertheless she betook herself to the shade of the live-oaks and lay down. When he went to call her for lunch he found her fast asleep with her head pillowed on her arm. She looked so haggard that he had not the heart to rouse her.

"Let her sleep. It will be the making of her. She's fair done. But ain't she plucky? And *that* spirited! Ready to fight so long as she can drag a foot. And her so sorter slim and delicate. Funny how she hangs onto her grudge against me. Sho! I hadn't ought to have kissed her, but I'll never tell her so."

He went back to his coffee and bacon, dined, and lay down for a siesta beneath a cottonwood some distance removed from the live-oaks where Miss Kinney reposed. For two or three hours he slept soundly, having been in the saddle all night. It was mid-afternoon when he awoke, and the sun was sliding down the blue vault toward the saw-toothed range to the west. He found the girl still lost to the world in deep slumber.

The man from the Panhandle looked across the desert that palpitated with heat, and saw through the marvelous atmosphere the smoke of the ore-miils curling upward. He was no tenderfoot, to suppose that ten minutes' brisk walking would take him to them. He guessed the distance at about two and a half hour's travel.

"This is ce'tainly a hot evening. I expect we better wait till sundown before moving," he said aloud.

Having made up his mind, it was characteristic of him that he was asleep again in five minutes. This time she wakened before him, to look into a wonderful sea of gold that filled the crotches of the

hills between the purple teeth. No sun was to be seen—it had sunk behind the peaks—but the trail of its declension was marked by that great pool of glory into which she gazed.

Margaret crossed the wash to the cottonwood under which her escort was lying. He was fast asleep on his back, his gray shirt open at the bronzed, sinewy neck. The supple, graceful lines of him were relaxed, but even her inexperience appreciated the splendid shoulders and the long rippling muscles. The maidenly instinct in her would allow but one glance at him, and she was turning away when his eyes opened.

Her face, judging from its tint, might have absorbed some of the sun-glow into which she had been gazing.

"I came to see if you were awake," she explained.

"Yes, ma'am, I am," he smiled.

"I was thinking that we ought to be going. It will be dark before we reach Mal Pais."

He leaped to his feet and faced her.

"C'rect."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

He relit the fire and put on the coffee-pot before he saddled the horse. She ate and drank hurriedly, soon announcing herself ready for the start.

She mounted from his hand; then without asking any questions he swung to a place behind her.

"We'll both ride," he said.

The stars were out before they reached the outskirts of the mining-camp. At the first house of the rambling suburbs Neill slipped to the ground and walked beside her toward the old adobe plaza of the Mexican town.

People passed them on the run, paying no attention to them, and others dribbled singly or in small groups from the houses and saloons. All of them were converging excitedly to the plaza.

"Must be something doing here," said her guide. "Now I wonder what!"

Round the next turn he found his answer. There must have been present two or three hundred men, mostly miners, and their gazes all focussed on two figures which stood against a door at the top of five or six steps. One of the forms was crouched on its knees, abject, cringing terror stamped on the white villainous face upturned to the electric light above. But the other was on its feet, a revolver in each hand, a smile of reckless daring on the boyish countenance that just now stood for law and order in Mal Pais.

The man beside the girl read the situation at a glance. The handcuffed figure groveling on the steps belonged to the murderer Struve, and over him stood lightly the young ranger Steve Fraser. He was standing off a mob that had gathered to lynch his prisoner, and one glance at him was enough to explain how he had won his reputation

as the most dashing and fearless member of a singularly efficient force. For plain to be read as the danger that confronted him was the fact that peril was as the breath of life to his nostrils.

CHAPTER VII

ENTER MR. DUNKE

"He's my prisoner and you can't have him," the girl heard the ranger say.

The answer came in a roar of rage. "By God, we'll show you!"

"If you want him, take him. But don't come unless you are ready to pay the price!" warned the officer.

He was bareheaded and his dark-brown curly hair crisped round his forehead engagingly. Round his right hand was tied a blood-stained handkerchief. A boy he looked, but his record was a man's, and so the mob that swayed uncertainly below him knew. His gray eyes were steady as steel despite the fire that glowed in them. He stood at ease, with nerve unshaken, the curious lifted look of a great moment about the poise of his graceful figure.

"It is Lieutenant Fraser," cried Margaret, but as she looked down she missed her escort.

An instant, and she saw him. He was circling the outskirts of the crowd at a run. For just a heart-beat she wondered what he was about, but

her brain told her before her eye. He swung in toward the steps, shoulders down, and bored a way through the stragglers straight to the heart of the turmoil. Taking the steps in two jumps, he stood beside the ranger.

"Hello, Tennessee," grinned that young man. "Come to be a pall-bearer?"

"Hello, Texas! Can't say, I'm sure. Just drapped in to see what's doing."

Steve's admiring gaze approved him a man from the ground up. But the ranger only laughed and said: "The band's going to play a right lively tune, looks like."

The man from the Panhandle had his revolvers out already. "Yes, there will be a hot time in the old town to-night, I shouldn't wonder."

But for the moment the attackers were inclined to parley. Their leader stepped out and held up a hand for a suspension of hostilities. He was a large man, heavily built, and powerful as a bear. There was about him an air of authority, as of one used to being obeyed. He was dressed roughly enough in corduroy and miner's half-leg boots, but these were of the most expensive material and cut. His cold gray eye and thin lips denied the manner of superficial heartiness he habitually carried. If one scratched the veneer of good nature it was to find a hard selfishness that went to his core.

"It's Mr. Dunke!" the young school-teacher cried aloud in surprise.

"I've got something to say to you, Mr. Lieutenant Ranger," he announced, with importance.

"Uncork it," was Fraser's advice.

"We don't want to have any trouble with you, but we're here for business. This man is a cold-blooded murderer and we mean to do justice on him."

Steve laughed insolently. "If all them that hollers for justice the loudest got it done to them, Mr. Dunke, there'd be a right smart shrinkage in the census returns."

Dunke's eye gleamed with anger. "We're not here to listen to any smart guys, sir. Will you give up Struve to us or will you not?"

"That's easy. I will not."

The mob leader turned to the Tennessean. "Young man, I don't know who you are, but if you mean to butt into a quarrel that ain't yours all I've got to say is that you're hunting an early grave."

"We'll know about that later, seh."

"You stand pat, do you?"

"Well, seh, I draw to a pair that opens the pot anyhow," answered Larry, with a slight motion of his weapons.

Dunke fell back into the mob, a shot rang out into the night, and the crowd swayed forward. But at that instant the door behind Fraser swung open. A frightened voice sounded in his ear.

"Quick, Steve!"

The ranger slewed his head, gave an exclamation of surprise, and hurriedly threw his prisoner into the open passage.

"Back, Larry! Lively, my boy!" he ordered.

Neill leaped back in a spatter of bullets that rained round him. Next moment the door was swung shut again.

"You all right, Nell?" asked Fraser quickly of the young woman who had opened the door, and upon her affirmative reply he added: "Everybody alive and kicking? Nobody get a pill?"

"I'm all right for one," returned Larry. "But we had better get out of this passage. I notice our friends the enemy are sending their cards through the door after us right anxious."

As he spoke a bullet tore a jagged splinter from a panel and buried itself in the ceiling. A second and a third followed.

"That's c'rect. We'd better be 'Not at home' when they call. Eh, Nell?"

Steve put an arm affectionately round the waist of the young woman who had come in such timely fashion to their aid and ran through the passage with her to the room beyond, Neill following with the prisoner.

"You're wounded, Steve," the young woman cried.

He shrugged. "Scratch in the hand. Got it when I arrested him. Had to shoot *his* trigger finger off."

"But I must see to it."

"Not now; wait till we're out of the woods." He turned to his friend: "Nell, let me introduce to you Mr. Neill, from the Panhandle. Mr. Neill, this is my sister. I don't know how come she to drop down behind us like an angel from heaven, but that's a story will wait. The thing we got to do right now is to light a shuck out of here."

His friend nodded, listening to the sound of blows battering the outer door. "They'll have it down in another minute. We've got to burn the wind seven ways for Sunday."

"What I'd like to know is whether there are two entrances to this rat-trap. Do you happen to know, Nell?" asked Fraser of his sister.

"Three," she answered promptly. "There's a back door into the court and a trap-door to the roof. That's the way I came."

"And it's the way we'll go. I might a-known you'd know all about it give you a quarter of a chance," her brother said admiringly. "We'll duck through the roof and let Mr. Dunke hold the sack. Lead the way, sis."

She guided them along another passageway and up some stairs to the second story. The trap-door that opened to the flat roof was above the bed about six feet. Neill caught the edges of the narrow opening, drew himself up, and wriggled through. Fraser lifted his sister by the waist high enough for Larry to catch her hands and draw her up.

"Hurry, Steve," she urged. "They've broken in. Hurry, dear."

The ranger unlocked his prisoner's handcuffs and tossed them up to the Tennessean.

"Get a move on you, Mr. Struve, unless you want to figure in a necktie party," he advised.

But the convict's flabby muscles were unequal to the task of getting him through the opening. Besides which, his wounded hand, tied up with a blood-soaked rag, impeded him. He had to be pulled from above and boosted from behind. Fraser, fit to handle his weight in wildcats, as an admirer had once put it, found no trouble in following. Steps were already heard on the stairs below when Larry slipped the cover to its place and put upon it a large flat stone which he found on the roof for that purpose. The fugitives crawled along the roof on their hands and knees so as to escape the observation of the howling mob outside the house. Presently they came into the shadows, and Nell rose, ran forward to a little ladder which led to a higher roof, and swiftly ascended. Neill, who was at her heels, could not fail to note the light supple grace with which she moved. He thought he had never seen a more charming woman in appearance. She still somehow retained the slim figure and taking ways of a girl, in conjunction with the soft rounded curves of a present-day Madonna.

Two more roofs were crossed before they came to another open trap-door. A lamp in the room

below showed it to be a bedroom with two cots in it. Two children, one of them a baby, were asleep in these. A sweet-faced woman past middle age looked anxiously up with hands clasped together as in prayer.

"Is it you, Nellie?" she asked.

"Yes, mother, and Steve, and his friend. We're all right."

Fraser dropped through, and his sister let herself down into his arms. Struve followed, and was immediately handcuffed. Larry put back the trap and fastened it from within before he dropped down.

"We shall have to leave at once, mother, without waiting to dress the children," explained Fraser. "Wrap them in blankets and take some clothes along. I'll drop you at the hotel and slip my prisoner into the jail the back way if I can; that is, if another plan I have doesn't work."

The oldest child awoke and caught sight of Fraser. He reached out his hands in excitement and began to call: "Uncle Steve! Uncle Steve back again."

Fraser picked up the youngster. "Yes, Uncle Steve is back. But we're going to play a game that Indians are after us. Webb must be good and keep very, very still. He mustn't say a word till uncle tells him he may."

The little fellow clapped his hands. "Goody, goody! Shall we begin now?"

"Right this minute, son. Better take your money with you, mother. Is father here?"

"No, he is at the ranch. He went down in the stage to-day."

"All right, friends. We'll take the back way. Tennessee, will you look out for Mr. Struve? Sis will want to carry the baby."

They passed quietly down-stairs and out the back door. The starry night enveloped them coldly, and the moon looked down through rifted clouds. Nature was peaceful as her own silent hills, but the raucous jangle of cursing voices from a distance made discord of the harmony. They slipped along through the shadows, meeting none except occasional figures hurrying to the plaza. At the hotel door the two men separated from the rest of the party, and took with them their prisoner.

"I'm going to put him for safe-keeping down the shaft of a mine my father and I own," explained Steve. "He wouldn't be safe in the jail, because Dunke, *for private reasons,* has made up his mind to put out his lights."

"Private reasons?" echoed the engineer.

"Mighty good ones, too. Ain't that right?" demanded the ranger of Struve.

The convict cursed, though his teeth still chattered with fright from the narrow escape he had had, but through his prison jargon ran a hint of some power he had over the man Dunke. It was

plain he thought the latter had incited the lynching in order to shut the convict's mouth forever.

"Where is this shaft?" asked Neill.

"Up a gulch about half a mile from here."

Fraser's eyes fixed themselves on a young man who passed on the run. He suddenly put his fingers to his lips and gave a low whistle. The running man stopped instantly, his head alert to catch the direction from which the sound had come. Steve whistled again and the stranger turned toward them.

"It's Brown, one of my rangers," explained the lieutenant.

Brown, it appeared, had just reached town and stabled his horse when word came to him that there was trouble on the plaza. He had been making for it when his officer's whistle stopped him.

"It's all over except getting this man to safety. I'm going to put him down an abandoned shaft of the Jackrabbit. He'll be safe there, and nobody will think to look for him in any such place," said Fraser.

The man from the Panhandle drew his friend to one side. "Do you need me any longer? I left Miss Kinney right on the edge of that mob, and I expect I better look around and see where she is now."

"All right. No, we don't need you. Take care you don't let any of these miners recognize you.

They might make you trouble while they're still hot. Well, so-long. See you to-morrow at the hotel."

The Tennessean looked to his guns to make sure they hung loose in the scabbards, then stepped briskly back toward the plaza.

CHAPTER VIII

"WOULD YOU WORRY ABOUT ME?"

Margaret Kinney's heart ceased beating in that breathless instant after the two dauntless friends had flung defiance to two hundred. There was a sudden tightening of her throat, a fixing of dilated eyes on what would have been a thrilling spectacle had it not meant so much more to her. For as she leaned forward in the saddle with parted lips she knew a passionate surge of fear for one of the apparently doomed men that went through her like swift poison, that left her dizzy with the shock of it.

The thought of action came to her too late. As Dunke stepped back to give the signal for attack she cried out his name, but her voice was drowned in the yell of rage that filled the street. She tried to spur her horse into the crowd, to force a way to the men standing with such splendid fearlessness above this thirsty pack of wolves. But the denseness of the throng held her fixed even while revolvers flashed.

And then the miracle happened. She saw the door open and limned in a penumbra of darkness the white comely face of a woman. She saw the

beleaguered men sway back and the door close in the faces of the horde. She saw bullets go crashing into the door, heard screams of baffled fury, and presently the crash of axes into the panels of the barrier that held them back. It seemed to fade away before her gaze, and instead of it she saw a doorway full of furious crowding miners.

Then presently her heart stood still again. From her higher place in the saddle, well back in the outskirts of the throng, in the dim light she made out a figure crouching on the roof; then another, and another, and a fourth. She suffered an agony of fear in the few heart-beats before they began to slip away. Her eyes swept the faces near her. One and all they were turned upon the struggling mass of humanity at the entrance to the passage. When she dared look again to the roof the fugitives were gone. She thought she perceived them swarming up a ladder to the higher roof, but in the surrounding grayness she could not be sure of this.

The stamping of feet inside the house continued. Once there was the sound of an exploding revolver. After a long time a heavy figure struggled into view through the roof-trap. It was Dunke himself. He caught sight of the ladder, gave a shout of triumph, and was off in pursuit of his flying prey. As others appeared on the roof they, too, took up the chase, a long line of indistinct running figures.

There were other women on the street now, most of them Mexicans, so that Margaret attracted little

attention. She moved up opposite the house that had become the scene of action, expecting every moment to hear the shots that would determine the fate of the victims.

But no shots came. Lights flashed from room to room, and presently one light began to fill a room so brilliantly that she knew a lamp must have been overturned and set the house on fire. Dunke burst from the front door, scarce a dozen paces from her. There was a kind of lurid fury in his eyes. He was as ravenously fierce as a wolf balked of its kill. She chose that moment to call him.

"Mr. Dunke!"

Her voice struck him into a sort of listening alertness, and again she pronounced his name.

"You, Miss Kinney—here?" he asked in amazement.

"Yes—Miss Kinney."

"But—— What are you doing here? I thought you were at Fort Lincoln."

"I was, but I'm here now."

"Why? This is no place for you to-night. Hell's broke loose."

"So it seems," she answered, with shining eyes.

"There's trouble afoot, Miss Margaret. No girl should be out, let alone an unprotected one."

"I did not come here unprotected. There was a man with me. The one, Mr. Dunke, that you are now looking for to murder!"

She gave it to him straight from the shoulder, her eyes holding his steadily.

"Struve?" he gasped, taken completely aback.

"No, not Struve. The man who stood beside Lieutenant Fraser, the one you threatened to kill because he backed the law."

"I guess you don't know all the facts, Miss Kinney." He came close and met her gaze while he spoke in a low voice. "There ain't many know what I know. Mebbe there ain't any beside you now. But *I* know you're Jim Kinney's sister."

"You are welcome to the knowledge. It is no secret. Lieutenant Fraser knows it. So does his friend. I'm not trying to hide it. What of it?"

Her quiet scorn drew the blood to his face.

"That's all right. If you do want to keep it quiet I'm with you. But there's something more. Your brother escaped from Yuma with this fellow Struve. Word came over the wire an hour or two ago that Struve had been captured and that it was certain he had killed his pal, your brother. That's why I mean to see him hanged before mo'ning."

"He did kill my brother. He told me so himself." Her voice carried a sob for an instant, but she went on resolutely. "What has that to do with it? Isn't there any law in Texas? Hasn't he been captured? And isn't he being taken back to his punishment?"

"He told you so himself!" the man echoed. "When did he tell you? When did you see him?"

"I was alone with him for twelve hours in the desert."

"Alone with you?" His puzzled face showed how he was trying to take this in. "I don't understand. How could he be alone with *you?*"

"I thought he was my brother and I was helping him to escape from Fort Lincoln."

"Helping him to escape! Helping Wolf Struve to escape! Well, I'm darned if that don't beat my time. How come you to think him your brother?" the man asked suspiciously.

"It doesn't matter how or why. I thought so. That's enough."

"And you were alone with him—why, you must have been alone with him all night," cried Dunke, coming to a fresh discovery.

"I was," she admitted very quietly.

A new suspicion edged itself into his mind. "What did you talk about? Did he say anything about—— Did he—— He always was a terrible liar. Nobody ever believed Wolf Struve."

Without understanding the reason for it, she could see that he was uneasy, that he was trying to discount the value of anything the convict might have told her. Yet what could Struve the convict, No. 9,432, have to do with the millionaire mine-owner, Thomas J. Dunke? What could there be in common between them? Why should the latter fear what the other had to tell? The thing was preposterous on the face of it, but the girl knew by

some woman's instinct that she was on the edge of a secret Dunke held hidden deep in his heart from all the world. Only this much she guessed; that Struve was a sharer of his secret, and therefore he was set on lynching the man before he had time to tell it.

"They got away, didn't they?" she asked.

"They got away—for the present," he answered grimly. "But we're still hunting them."

"Can't you let the law take its course, Mr. Dunke? Is it necessary to do this terrible thing?"

"Don't you worry any about it, Miss Kinney. This ain't a woman's job. I'll attend to it."

"But my friends," she reminded him.

"We ain't intending to hurt them any. Come, I'll see you home. You staying at the hotel?"

"I don't know. I haven't made any arrangements yet."

"Well, we'll go make them now."

But she did not move. "I'm not going in till I know how this comes out."

He was a man used to having his own brutal way, one strong by nature, with strength increased by the money upon which he rode rough-shod to success.

He laughed as he caught hold of the rein. "That's ridiculous!"

"But *my* business, I think," the girl answered sharply, jerking the bridle from his fingers.

Dunke stared at her. It was his night of sur-

prises. He failed to recognize the conventional teacher he knew in this bright-eyed, full-throated young woman who fronted him so sure of herself. She seemed to him to swim brilliantly in a tide of flushed beauty, in spite of the dust and the stains of travel. She was in a shapeless khaki riding-suit and a plain, gray, broad-brimmed Stetson. But the one could not hide the flexible curves that made so frankly for grace, nor the other the coppery tendrils that escaped in fascinating disorder from under its brim.

"You hadn't ought to be out here. It ain't right."

"I don't remember asking you to act as a standard of right and wrong for me."

He laughed awkwardly. "We ain't quarreling, are we, Miss Margaret?"

"Certainly I am not. I don't quarrel with anybody but my friends."

"Well, I didn't aim to offend you anyway. You know me better than that." He let his voice fall into a caressing modulation and put a propitiatory hand on her skirt, but under the uncompromising hardness of her gaze the hand fell away to his side. "*I'm* your friend—leastways I want to be."

"My friends don't lynch men."

"But after what he did to your brother."

"The law will take care of that. If you want to please me call off your men before it is too late."

It was his cue to please her, for so far as it was in him the man loved her. He had set his strong

will to trample on his past, to rise to a place where no man could shake his security with proof of his former misdeeds. He meant to marry her and to place her out of reach of those evil days of his. Only Struve was left of the old gang, and he knew the Wolf well enough to be sure that the fellow would delight in blackmailing him. The convict's mouth must be closed. But just now he must promise what she wanted, and he did.

The promise was still on his lips when a third person strode into their conversation.

"Sorry I had to leave you so hastily, Miss Kinney. I'm ready to take you to the hotel now if it suits you."

Both of them turned quickly, to see the man from the Panhandle sauntering forth from the darkness. There was a slight smile on his face, which did not abate when he nodded to Dunke amiably.

"You?" exclaimed the mine-owner angrily.

"Why, yes—me. Hope we didn't inconvenience you, seh, by postponing the coyote's journey to Kingdom Come. My friend had to take a hand because he is a ranger, and I sat in to oblige him. No hard feelings, I hope."

"Did you—— Are you all safe?" Margaret asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Got away slick and clean."

"Where?" barked Dunke.

"Where what, my friend?"

"Where did you take him?"

Larry laughed in slow deep enjoyment. "I hate to disappoint you, but if I told that would be telling. No, I reckon I won't table my cards yet a while. If you're playing in this game of Hi-Spy go to it and hunt."

"Perhaps you don't know that I am T. J Dunke."

"You don't say! And I'm General Grant. This lady hyer is Florence Nightingale or Martha Washington, I disremember which."

Miss Kinney laughed. "Whichever she is she's very very tired," she said. "I think I'll accept your offer to see me to the hotel, Mr. Neill."

She nodded a careless good night to the mine-owner, and touched the horse with her heel. At the porch of the rather primitive hotel she descended stiffly from the saddle.

Before she left the Southerner—or the Westerner, for sometimes she classified him as one, sometimes as the other—she asked him one hesitant question.

"Were you thinking of going out again to-night?"

"I did think of taking a turn out to see if I could find Fraser. Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. Please don't go. I don't want to have to worry about you. I have had enough trouble for the present."

"Would you worry about me?" he asked quietly, his eyes steadily on her.

"I lie awake about the most unaccountable things sometimes."

He smiled in his slow Southern fashion. "Very well. I'll stay indoors. I reckon Steve ain't lost, anyhow. You're too tired to have to lie awake about me to-night. There's going to be lots of other nights for you to think of me."

She glanced at him with a quick curiosity. "Well, of all the conceit I ever heard!"

"I'm the limit, ain't I?" he grinned as he took himself off.

CHAPTER IX

DOWN THE JACKRABBIT SHAFT.

Next morning Larry got up so late that he had to order a special breakfast for himself, the dining-room being closed. He found one guest there, however, just beginning her oatmeal, and he invited himself to eat at her table.

"Good mawnin', Miss Kinney. You don't look like you had been lying awake worrying about me," he began by way of opening the conversation.

Nor did she. Youth recuperates quickly, and after a night's sound sleep she was glowing with health and sweet vitality. He could see a flush beat into the fresh softness of her flesh, but she lifted her dark lashes promptly to meet him, and came to the sex duel gaily.

"I suppose you think I had to take a sleeping-powder to keep me from it?" she flashed back.

"Oh, well, a person can dream," he suggested.

"How did you know? But you are right. I did dream of you."

To the waiter he gave his order before answering her. "Some oatmeal and bacon and eggs. Yes, coffee. And some hot cakes, Charlie. Did you

honest dream about me?" This last not to the Chinese waiter who had padded soft-footed to the kitchen.

"Yes."

She smiled shyly at him with sweet innocence, and he drew his chair a trifle closer.

"Tell me."

"I don't like to."

"But you must. Go on."

"Well," very reluctantly. "I dreamed I was visiting the penitentiary and you were there in stripes. You were in for stealing a sheep, I think. Yes, that was it, for stealing a sheep."

"Couldn't you make it something more classy if you're bound to have me in?" he begged, enjoying immensely the rise she was taking out of him.

"I have to tell it the way it was," she insisted, her eyes bubbling with fun. "And it seems you were the prison cook. First thing I knew you were standing in front of a wall and two hundred of the prisoners were shooting at you. They were using your biscuits as bullets."

"That was a terrible revenge to take on me for baking them."

"It seems you had your sheep with you—the one you stole, and you and it were being pelted all over."

"Did you see a lady hold-up among those shooting at me?" he inquired anxiously.

She shook her head. "And just when the bis-

cuits were flying thickest the wall opened and Mr. Fraser appeared. He caught you and the sheep by the back of your necks, and flung you in. Then the wall closed, and I awoke."

"That's about as near the facts as dreams usually get."

He was very much pleased, for it would have been a great disappointment to him if she had admitted dreaming about him for any reason except to make fun of him. The thing about her that touched his imagination most was something wild and untamed, some quality of silken strength in her slim supple youth that scoffed at all men and knew none as master. He meant to wrest from her if he could an interest that would set him apart in her mind from all others, but he wanted the price of victory to cost him something. Thus the value of it would be enhanced.

"But tell me about your escape—all about it and what became of Lieutenant Fraser. And first of all, who the lady was that opened the door for you," she demanded.

"She was his sister."

"Oh! His sister." Her voice was colorless. She observed him without appearing to do so. "Very pretty, I thought her. Didn't you?"

"Right nice looking. Had a sort of an expression made a man want to look at her again."

"Yes."

Innocently unaware that he was being pumped, he contributed more information. "And *that* game."

"She was splendid. I can see her now opening the door in the face of the bullets."

"Never a scream out of her either. Just as cool."

"That is the quality men admire most, isn't it—courage?"

"I don't reckon that would come first. Course it wouldn't make a hit with a man to have a woman puling around all the time."

"My kind, you mean."

Though she was smiling at him with her lips, it came to him that his words were being warped to a wrong meaning.

"No, I don't," he retorted bluntly.

"As I remember it, I was bawling every chance I got yesterday and the day before," she recalled, with fine contempt of herself.

"Oh, well! You had reason a-plenty. And sometimes a woman cries just like a man cusses. It don't mean anything. I once knew a woman wet her handkerchief to a sop crying because her husband forgot one mo'ning to kiss her good-by. She quit irrigating to run into a burning house after a neighbor's kids."

"I accept your apology for my behavior if you'll promise I won't do it again," she laughed. "But tell me more about Miss Fraser. Does she live here?"

For a moment he was puzzled. "Miss Fraser! Oh! She gave up that name several years ago. Mrs. Collins they call her. And say, you ought to see her kiddies. You'd fall in love with them sure."

The girl covered her mistake promptly with a little laugh. It would never do for him to know she had been yielding to incipient jealousy. "Why can't I know them? I want to meet her too."

The door opened and a curly head was thrust in. "Dining-room closes for breakfast at nine. My clock says it's ten-thirty now. Pretty near work to keep eating that long, ain't it? And this Sunday, too! I'll have you put in the calaboose for breaking the Sabbath."

"We're only bending it," grinned Neill. "Good mo'ning, Lieutenant. How is Mrs. Collins, and the pickaninnies?"

"First rate. Waiting in the parlor to be introduced to Miss Kinney."

"We're through," announced Margaret, rising.

"You too, Tennessee? The proprietor will be grateful."

The young women took to each other at once. Margaret was very fond of children, and the little boy won her heart immediately. Both he and his baby sister were well-trained, healthy, and lovable little folks, and they adopted "Aunt Peggy" enthusiastically.

Presently the ranger proposed to Neill an adjournment.

"I got to take some breakfast down the Jackrabbit shaft to my prisoner. Wanter take a stroll that way?" he asked.

"If the ladies will excuse us."

"Glad to get rid of you," Miss Kinney assured him promptly, but with a bright smile that neutralized the effect of her sauciness. "Mrs. Collins and I want to have a talk."

The way to the Jackrabbit lay up a gulch behind the town. Up one incline was a shaft-house with a great gray dump at the foot of it. This they left behind them, climbing the hill till they came to the summit.

The ranger pointed to another shaft-house and dump on the next hillside.

"That's the Mal Pais, from which the district is named. Dunke owns it and most of the others round here. His workings and ours come together in several places, but we have boarded up the tunnels at those points and locked the doors we put in. Wonder where Brown is? I told him to meet me here to let us down."

At this moment they caught sight of him coming up a timbered draw. He lowered them into the shaft, which was about six hundred feet deep. From the foot of the shaft went a tunnel into the heart of the mountain. Steve led the way, flashing an electric searchlight as he went.

"We aren't working this part of the mine any more," he explained. "It connects with the newer

workings by a tunnel. We'll go back that way to the shaft."

"You've got quite a safe prison," commented the other.

"It's commodious, anyhow; and I reckon it's safe. If a man was to get loose he couldn't reach the surface without taking somebody into partnership with him. There ain't but three ways to daylight; one by the shaft we came down, another by way of our shaft-house, and the third by Dunke's, assuming he could break through into the Mal Pais. He'd better not break loose and go to wandering around. There are seventeen miles of workings down here in the Jackrabbit, let alone the Mal Pais. He might easily get lost and starve to death. Here he is at the end of this tunnel."

Steve flashed the light twice before he could believe his eyes. There was no sign of Struve except the handcuffs depending from an iron chain connected by a heavy staple with the granite wall. Apparently he had somehow managed to slip from the gyves by working at them constantly.

The officer turned to his friend and laughed. "I reckon I'm holding the sack this time. See. There's blood on these cuffs. He rasped his hands some before he got them out."

"Well, you've still got him safe down here somewhere."

"Yes, I have or Dunke has. The trouble is both the mines are shut down just now. He's got

about forty miles of tunnel to play hide-and-go-seek in. He's in luck if he doesn't starve to death."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll have to get some of my men out on search-parties—just tell them there's a man lost down here without telling them who. I reckon we better say nothing about it to the ladies. You know how tender-hearted they are. Nellie wouldn't sleep a wink to-night for worrying."

"All right. We'd better get to it at once then."

Fraser nodded. "We'll go up and rustle a few of the boys that know the mine well. I expect before we find him Mr. Wolf Struve will be a lamb and right anxious for the shepherd to arrive."

All day the search proceeded without results, and all of the next day. The evening of this second day found Struve still not accounted for.

CHAPTER X

IN A TUNNEL OF THE MAL PAIS

Although Miss Kinney had assured Neill that she was glad to be rid of him it occurred to her more than once in the course of the day that he was taking her a little too literally. On Sunday she did not see a glimpse of him after he left. At lunch he did not appear, nor was he in evidence at dinner. Next morning she learned that he had been to breakfast and had gone before she got down. She withheld judgment till lunch, being almost certain that he would be on hand to that meal. His absence roused her resentment and her independence. If he didn't care to see her she certainly did not want to see him. She was not going to sit around and wait for him to take her down into the mine he had promised she should see. Let him forget his appointment if he liked. He would wait a long time before she made any more engagements with him.

About this time Dunke began to flatter himself that he had made an impression. Miss Kinney was all smiles. She was graciously pleased to take a horseback ride over the camp with him, nor did

he know that her roving eye was constantly on the lookout for a certain spare, clean-built figure she could recognize at a considerable distance by the easy, elastic tread. Monday evening the mine-owner called upon her and Mrs. Collins, whose brother also was among the missing, and she was delighted to accept his invitation to go through the Mal Pais workings with him.

"That is, if Mrs. Collins will go, too," she added as an afterthought.

That young woman hesitated. Though this man had led his miners against her brother, she was ready to believe the attack not caused by personal enmity. The best of feeling did not exist between the owners of the Jackrabbit and those of the Mal Pais. Dunke was suspected of boldly crossing into the territory of his neighbor where his veins did not lead. But there had been no open rupture. For the very reason that an undertow of feeling existed Nellie consented to join the party. She did not want by a refusal to put into words a hostility that she had always carefully veiled. She was in the position of not wanting to go at all, yet wanting still less to decline to do so.

"I shall be glad to go," she said.

"Fine. We'll start about nine, or nine-thirty say. I'll drive up in a surrey."

"And we'll have lunch for the party put up at the hotel here. I'll get some fruit to take along," said Margaret.

"We'll make a regular picnic of it," added Dunke heartily. "You'll enjoy eating out of a dinner-pail for once just like one of my miners, Miss Kinney."

After he had gone Margaret mentioned to Mrs. Collins her feeling concerning him. "I don't really like him. Or rather I don't give him my full confidence. He seems pleasant enough, too." She laughed a little as she added: "You know he does me the honor to admire me."

"Yes, I know that. I was wondering how you felt about it."

"How ought one to feel about one of the great mining kings of the West?"

"Has that anything to do with it, my dear? I mean his being a mining king?" asked Mrs. Collins gently.

Margaret went up to her and kissed her. "You're a romantic little thing. That's because you probably married a heaven-sent man. We can't all be fortunate."

"We none of us need to marry where we don't love."

"Goodness me! I'm not thinking of marrying Mr. Dunke's millions. The only thing is that I don't have a Crœsus to exhibit every day at my chariot wheels. It's horrid of course, but I have a natural feminine reluctance to surrendering him all at once. I don't object in the least to trampling on him, but somehow I don't feel ready for his declaration of independence."

"Oh, if that's all!" her friend smiled.

"That's quite all."

"Perhaps you prefer Texans who come from the Panhandle."

Mrs. Collins happened to be looking straight at her out of her big brown eyes. Wherefore she could not help observing the pink glow that deepened in the soft cheeks.

"He hasn't preferred *me* much lately."

Nellie knitted her brow in perplexity. "I don't understand. Steve's been away, too, nearly all the time. Something is going on that we don't know about."

"Not that I care. Mr. Neill is welcome to stay away."

Her new friend shot a swift slant look at her. "I don't suppose you trample on *him* much."

Margaret flushed. "No, I don't. It's the other way. I never saw anybody so rude. He does not seem to have any saving sense of the proper thing."

"He's a man, dearie, and a good one. He may be untrammeled by convention, but he is clean and brave. He has eyes that look through cowardice and treachery, fine strong eyes that are honest and unafraid."

"Dear me, you must have studied them a good deal to see all that in them," said Miss Peggy lightly, yet pleased withal.

"My dear," reproached her friend, so seriously that Peggy repented.

"I didn't really mean it," she laughed. "I've heard already on good authority that you see no man's eyes except the handsome ones in the face of Mr. Tim Collins."

"I *do* think Tim has fine eyes," blushed the accused.

"No doubt of it. Since you have been admiring my young man I must praise yours," teased Miss Kinney.

"Am I to wish you joy? I didn't know he was your young man," flashed back the other.

"I understand that you have been trying to put him off on me."

"You'll find he does not need any 'putting off' on anybody."

"At least, he has a good friend in you. I think I'll tell him, so that when he does condescend to become interested in a young woman he may refer her to you for a recommendation."

The young wife borrowed for the occasion some of Miss Peggy's audacity. "I'm recommending him to that young woman now, my dear," she made answer.

Dunke's party left for the mine on schedule time. Water-proof coats and high lace-boots had been borrowed for the ladies as a protection against the moisture they were sure to meet in the tunnels one thousand feet below the ground. The mine-owner had had the hoisting-engine started for the occasion, and the cage took them down as swiftly

and as smoothly as a metropolitan elevator. Nevertheless Margaret clung tightly to her friend, for it was her first experience of the kind. She had never before dropped nearly a quarter of a mile straight down into the heart of the earth and she felt a smothered sensation, a sense of danger induced by her unaccustomed surroundings. It is the unknown that awes, and when she first stepped from the cage and peered down the long, low tunnel through which a tramway ran she caught her breath rather quickly. She had an active imagination, and she conjured cave-ins, explosions, and all the other mine horrors she had read about.

Their host had spared no expense to make the occasion a gala one. Electric lights were twinkling at intervals down the tunnel, and an electric ore-car with a man in charge was waiting to run them into the workings nearly a mile distant. Dunke dealt out candles and assisted his guests into the car, which presently carried them deep into the mine. Margaret observed that the timbered sides of the tunnel leaned inward slightly and that the roof was heavily cross-timbered.

"It *looks* safe," she thought aloud.

"It's safe enough," returned Dunke carelessly. "The place for cave-ins is at the head of the workings, before we get drifts timbered."

"Are we going into any of those places?"

"I wouldn't take *you* into any place that wasn't safe, Miss Margaret."

"Is it always so dreadfully warm down here?" she asked.

"You must remember we're somewhere around a thousand feet in the heart of the earth. Yes, it's always warm."

"I don't see how the men stand it and work."

"Oh, they get used to it."

They left the car and followed a drift which took them into a region of perpetual darkness, into which the electric lights did not penetrate. Margaret noticed that her host carried his candle with ease, holding it at an angle that gave the best light and most resistance to the air, while she on her part had much ado to keep hers from going out. Frequently she had to stop and let the tiny flame renew its hold on the base of supplies. So, without his knowing it, she fell behind gradually, and his explanations of stopes, drifts, air-drills, and pay-streaks fell only upon the already enlightened ears of Mrs. Collins.

The girl had been picking her way through some puddles of water that had settled on the floor, and when she looked up the lights of those ahead had disappeared. She called to them faintly and hurried on, appalled at the thought of possibly losing them in these dreadful underground catacombs where Stygian night forever reigned. But her very hurry delayed her, for in her haste the gust of her motion swept out the flame. She felt her way forward along the wall, in a darkness such as she

had never conceived before. Nor could she know that by chance she was following the wrong wall. Had she chosen the other her hand must have come to a break in it which showed that a passage at that point deflected from the drift toward the left. Unconsciously she passed this, already frightened but resolutely repressing her fear.

"I'll not let them know what an idiot I am. I'll not! I'll not!" she told herself.

Therefore she did not call yet, thinking she must come on them at any moment, unaware that every step was taking her farther from the gallery into which they had turned. When at last she cried out it was too late. The walls hemmed in her cry and flung it back tauntingly to her—the damp walls against which she crouched in terror of the subterranean vault in which she was buried. She was alone with the powers of darkness, with the imprisoned spirits of the underworld that fought inarticulately against the audacity of the puny humans who dared venture here. So her vivid imagination conceived it, terrorizing her against both will and reason.

How long she wandered, a prey to terror, calling helplessly in the blackness, she did not know. It seemed to her that she must always wander so, a perpetual prisoner condemned to this living grave. So that it was with a distinct shock of glad surprise she heard a voice answer faintly her calls. Calling and listening alternately, she groped her way in the

direction of the sounds, and so at last came plump against the figure of the approaching rescuer.

"Who is it?" a hoarse voice demanded.

But before she could answer a match flared and was held close to her face. The same light that revealed her to him told the girl who this man was that had met her alone a million miles from human aid. The haggard, drawn countenance with the lifted upper lip and the sunken eyes that glared into hers belonged to the convict Nick Struve.

The match went out before either of them spoke.

"You—you here!" she exclaimed, and was oddly conscious that her relief at meeting even him had wiped out for the present her fear of the man.

"For God's sake, have you got anything to eat?" he breathed thickly.

It had been part of the play that each member of their little party should carry a dinner-pail just like an ordinary miner. Wherefore she had hers still in her hand.

"Yes, and I have a candle here. Have you another match?"

He lit the candle with a shaking hand.

"Gimme that bucket," he ordered gruffly, and began to devour ravenously the food he found in it, tearing at sandwiches and gulping them down like a hungry dog.

"What day is this?" he stopped to ask after he had stayed the first pangs.

She told him Tuesday.

"I ain't eaten since Saturday," he told her. "I figured it was a week. There ain't any days in this place—nothin' but night. Can't tell one from another."

"It's terrible," she agreed.

His appetite was wolfish. She could see that he was spent, so weak with hunger that he had reeled against the wall as she handed him the dinner-pail. Pallor was on the sunken face, and exhaustion in the trembling hands and unsteady gait.

"I'm about all in, what with hunger and all I been through. I thought I was out of my head when I heard you holler." He snatched up the candle from the place where he had set it and searched her face by its flame. "How come you down here? You didn't come alone. What you doin' here?" he demanded suspiciously.

"I came down with Mr. Dunke and a friend to look over his mine. I had never been in one before."

"Dunke!" A spasm of rage swept the man's face. "You're a friend of his, are you? Where is he? If you came with him how come you to be roaming around alone?"

"I got lost. Then my light went out."

"So you're a friend of Dunke, that damned double-crosser! He's a millionaire, you think, a big man in this Western country. That's what he claims, eh?" Struve shook a fist into the air in a

mad burst of passion. "Just watch me blow him higher'n a kite. I know what he is, and I got proof. The Judas! I keep my mug shut and do time while he gets off scot-free and makes his pile. But you listen to me, ma'am. Your friend ain't nothin' but an outlaw. If he got his like I got mine he'd be at Yuma to-day. Your brother could a-told you. Dunke was at the head of the gang that held up that train. We got nabbed, me and Jim. Burch got shot in the Catalinas by one of the rangers, and Smith died of fever in Sonora. But Dunke, curse him, he sneaks out and buys the officers off *with our plunder*. That's what he done—let his partners get railroaded through while he sails out slick and easy. But he made one mistake, Mr. Dunke did. He wrote me a letter and told me to keep mum and he would fix it for me to get out in a few months. I believed him, kept my mouth padlocked, and served seven years without him lifting a hand for me. Then, when I make my getaway he tries first off to shut my mouth by putting me out of business. That's what your friend done, ma'am."

"Is this true?" asked the girl whitely.

"So help me God, every word of it."

"He let my brother go to prison without trying to help him?"

"Worse than that. He *sent* him to prison. Jim was all right when he first met up with Dunke. It was Dunke that got him into his wild ways and led

him into trouble. It was Dunke took him into the hold-up business. Hadn't been for him Jim never would have gone wrong."

She made no answer. Her mind was busy piecing out the facts of her brother's misspent life. As a little girl she remembered her big brother before he went away, good-natured, friendly, always ready to play with her. She was sure he had not been bad, only fatally weak. Even this man who had slain him was ready to testify to that.

She came back from her absorption to find Struve outlining what he meant to do.

"We'll go back this passage along the way you came. I want to find Mr. Dunke. I allow I've got something to tell him he will be right interested in hearing."

He picked up the candle and led the way along the tunnel. Margaret followed him in silence.

CHAPTER XI

THE SOUTHERNER TAKES A RISK

The convict shambled forward through the tunnel till he came to a drift which ran into it at a right angle.

"Which way now?" he demanded.

"I don't know."

"Don't know," he screamed. "Didn't you just come along here? Do you want me to get lost again in this hell-hole?"

The stricken fear leaped into his face. He had forgotten her danger, forgotten everything but the craven terror that engulfed him. Looking at him, she was struck for the first time with the thought that he might be on the verge of madness.

His cry still rang through the tunnel when Margaret saw a gleam of distant light. She pointed it out to Struve, who wheeled and fastened his eyes upon it. Slowly the faint yellow candle-rays wavered toward them. A man was approaching through the gloom, a large man whom she presently recognized as Dunke. A quick gasp from the one beside her showed that he too knew the man. He took

a dozen running steps forward, so that in his haste the candle flickered out.

"That you, Miss Margaret?" the mine-owner called.

Neither she nor Struve answered. The latter had stopped and was waiting tensely his enemy's approach. When he was within a few yards of the other Dunke raised his candle and peered into the blackness ahead of him.

"What's the matter? Isn't it you, Miss Peggy?"

"No, it ain't. It's your old pal, Nick Struve. Ain't you glad to see him, Joe?"

Dunke looked him over without a word. His thin lips set and his gaze grew wall-eyed. The candle passed from right to left hand.

Struve laughed evilly. "No, I'm not going to pay you that way—not yet; nor you ain't going to rid yourself of me either. Want to know why, Mr. Millionaire Dunke, what used to be my old pal? Want to know why it ain't going to do you any good to drop that right hand any closeter to your hip pocket?"

Still Dunke said nothing, but the candle-glow that lit his face showed an ugly expression.

"Don't you whip that gun out, Joe Dunke. Don't you! 'Cause why? If you do you're a goner."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I kept the letter you wrote me seven years ago, and have put it where it will do you no

good if anything happens to me. That's why you won't draw that gun, Joe Dunke. If you do it will send you to Yuma. Millionaire you may be, but that won't keep you from wearing stripes."

Struve's voice rang exultantly. From the look in the face of his old comrade in crime who had prospered at his expense, as he chose to think, he saw that for the time being he had got the whip-hand.

There was a long silence before Dunke asked hoarsely:

"What do you want?"

"I want you to hide me. I want you to get me out of this country. I want you to divvy up with me. Didn't we grub-stake you with the haul from the Overland? Don't we go share and share alike, the two of us that's left? Ain't that fair and square? You wouldn't want to do less than right by an old pal, cap, you that are so respectable and proper now. You ain't forgot the man that lay in the ditch with you the night we held up the flyer, the man that rode beside you when you shot——"

"For God's sake don't rake up forgotten scrapes. We were all young together then. I'll do what's right by you, but you got to keep your mouth shut and let me manage this."

"The way you managed it before when you let me rot at Yuma seven years," jeered Struve.

"I couldn't help it. They were on my trail and I had to lie low. I tell you I'll pull you through if you do as I say."

"And I tell you I don't believe a word you say. You double-crossed me before and you will again if you get a chance. I'll not let you out of my sight."

"Don't be a fool, Nick. How can I help you if I can't move around to make the arrangements for running you across the line?"

"And what guarantee have I got you ain't making arrangements to have me scragged? Think I'm forgetting Saturday night?"

The girl in the blackness without the candle-shine moved slightly.

"What's that?" asked Dunke, startled.

"What's what?"

"That noise. Some one moved."

Dunke's revolver came swiftly from his pocket.

"I reckon it must a-been the girl."

"What girl? Miss Kinney?"

Dunke's hard eyes fastened on the other like steel augers.

Margaret came forward and took wraithlike shape.

"I want you to take me to Mrs. Collins, Mr. Dunke," she said.

The steel probes shifted from Struve to her. "What did you hear, Miss Kinney? This man is

a storehouse of lies. I let him run on to see how far he would go."

Struve's harsh laugh filled the tunnel.

"Take me to Mrs. Collins," she reiterated wearily.

"Not till I know what you heard," answered Dunke doggedly.

"I heard everything," she avowed boldly. "The whole wretched, miserable truth."

She would have pushed past him, but he caught her arm.

"Let me go!"

"I tell you it's all a mistake. I can explain it. Give me time."

"I won't listen. I want never to see either of you again. What have I ever done that I should be mixed up with such men?" she cried, with bitter despair.

"Don't go off half-cocked. 'Course I'll take you to Mrs. Collins if you like. But you got to listen to what I say."

Another candle glimmered dimly in the tunnel and came toward them. It presently stopped, and a voice rolled along the vault.

"Hello, there!"

Margaret would have known that voice anywhere among a thousand. Now it came to her sweet as water after a drought. She slipped past Dunke and ran stumbling through the darkness to its source.

"Mr. Neill! Mr. Neill!"

The pitiful note in her voice, which he recognized instantly, stirred him to the core. Astonished that she should be in the mine and in trouble, he dashed forward, and his candle went out in the rush Groping in the darkness her hands encountered his. His arms closed round her, and in her need of protection that brushed aside conventions and non-essentials, the need that had spoken in her cry of relief, in her hurried flight to him, she lay panting and trembling in his arms. He held her tight, as one who would keep his own against the world.

"How did you get here—what has happened?" he demanded.

Hurriedly she explained.

"Oh, take me away, take me away!" she concluded, nestling to him with no thought now of seeking to disguise her helpless dependence upon him, of hiding from herself the realization that he was the man into whose keeping destiny had ordained that she was to give her heart.

"All right, honey. You're sure all safe now," he said tenderly, and in the blackness his lips sought and met hers in a kiss that sealed the understanding their souls had reached.

At the sound of Neill's voice Dunke had extinguished the candle and vanished in the darkness with Struve, the latter holding him by the arm in a despairing grip. Neill shouted again and again, as

he relighted his candle, but there came no answer to his calls.

"We had better make for the shaft," he said.

They set out on the long walk to the opening that led up to the light and the pure air. For a while they walked on in silence. At last he took her hand and guided her fingers across the seam on his wrist.

"It don't seem only four days since you did that, honey," he murmured.

"Did I do that?" Her voice was full of self-reproach, and before he could stop her she lifted his hand and kissed the welt.

"Don't, sweet. I deserved what I got and more. I'm ready with that apology you didn't want then, Peggy."

"But I don't want it now, either. I won't have it. Didn't I tell you I wouldn't? Besides," she added, with a little leap of laughter in her voice, "why should you ask pardon for kissing the girl you were meant to—to——"

He finished it for her.

"To marry, Peggy. I didn't know it then, but I knew it before you said good-by with your whip."

"And I didn't know it till next morning," she said.

"Did you know it then, when you were so mean to me?"

"That was why I was so mean to you. I had

to punish myself and you because I—liked you so well."

She buried her face shyly in his coat to cover this confession.

It seemed easy for both of them to laugh over nothing in the exuberance of their common happiness. His joy pealed now delightedly.

"I can't believe it—that four days ago you wasn't on the earth for me. Seems like you always belonged; seems like I always enjoyed your sassy ways."

"That's just the way I feel about you. It's really scandalous that in less than a week—just a little more than half a week—we should be engaged. We *are* engaged, aren't we?"

"Very much."

"Well, then—it sounds improper, but it isn't the least bit. It's right. Isn't it?"

"It ce'tainly is."

"But you know I've always thought that people who got engaged so soon are the same kind of people that correspond through matrimonial papers. I didn't suppose it would ever happen to *me.*"

"Some right strange things happen while a person is alive, Peggy."

"And I don't really know anything at all about you except that you say your name is Larry Neill. Maybe you are married already."

She paused, startled at the impossible thought.

"It must have happened before I can remember, then," he laughed.

"Or engaged. Very likely you have been engaged a dozen times. Southern people do, they say."

"Then I'm an exception."

"And me—you don't know anything about me."

"A fellow has to take some risk or quit living," he told her gaily.

"When you think of my temper doesn't it make you afraid?"

"The samples I've had were surely right exhilarating," he conceded. "I'm expecting enough difference of opinion to keep life interesting."

"Well, then, if you won't be warned you'll just have to take me and risk it."

And she slipped her arm into his and held up her lips for the kiss awaiting her.

CHAPTER XII

EXIT DUNKE

Dunke plowed back through the tunnel in a blind whirl of passion. Rage, chagrin, offended vanity, acute disappointment, all blended with a dull heartache to which he was a stranger. He was a dangerous man in a dangerous mood, and so Wolf Struve was likely to discover. But the convict was not an observant man. His loose upper lip lifted in the ugly sneer to which it was accustomed.

"Got onto you, didn't she?"

Dunke stuck his candle in a niche of the ragged granite wall, strode across to his former partner in crime, and took the man by the throat.

"I'll learn you to keep that vile tongue of yours still," he said between set teeth, and shook the hapless man till he was black in the face.

Struve hung, sputtering and coughing, against the wall where he had been thrown. It was long before he could do more than gasp.

"What—what did you do—that for?" His furtive ratlike face looked venomous in its impotent anger. "I'll pay you for this—and don't you—forget it, Joe Dunke!"

"You'd shoot me in the back the way you did Jim Kinney if you got a chance. I know that; but you see you won't get a chance."

"I ain't looking for no such chance. I——"

"That's enough. I don't have to stand for your talk even if I do have to take care of you. Light your candle and move along this tunnel lively."

Something in Dunke's eye quelled the rebellion the other contemplated. He shuffled along, whining as he went that he would never have looked for his old pal to treat him so. They climbed ladders to the next level, passed through an empty stope, and stopped at the end of a drift.

"I'll arrange to get you out of here to-night and have you run across the line. I'm going to give you three hundred dollars. That's the last cent you'll ever get out of me. If you ever come back to this country I'll see that you're hanged as you deserve."

With that Dunke turned on his heel and was gone. But his contempt for the ruffian he had cowed was too fearless. He would have thought so if he could have known of the shadow that dogged his heels through the tunnel, if he could have seen the bare fangs that had gained Struve his name of "Wolf," if he could have caught the flash of the knife that trembled in the eager hand. He did not know that, as he shot up in the cage to the sunlight, the other was filling the tunnel with imprecations and wild threats, that he was hugging

himself with the promise of a revenge that should be sure and final.

Dunke went about the task of making the necessary arrangements personally. He had his surrey packed with food, and about eleven o'clock drove up to the mine and was lowered to the ninth level. An hour later he stepped out of the cage with a prisoner whom he kept covered with a revolver.

"It's that fellow Struve," he explained to the astonished engineer in the shaft-house. "I found him down below. It seems that Fraser took him down the Jackrabbit and he broke loose and worked through to our ground."

"Do you want any help in taking him downtown, sir? Shall I phone for the marshal?"

His boss laughed scornfully.

"When I can't handle one man after I've got him covered I'll let you know, Johnson."

The two men went out into the starlit night and got into the surrey. The play with the revolver had hitherto been for the benefit of Johnson, but it now became very real. Dunke jammed the rim close to the other's temple.

"I want that letter I wrote you. Quick, by Heaven! No fairy-tales, but the letter!"

"I swear, Joe——"

"The letter, you villain! I know you never let it go out of your possession. Give it up! Quick!"

Struve's hand stole to his breast, came out slowly to the edge of his coat, then leaped with a flash

of something bright toward the other's throat. Simultaneously the revolver rang out. A curse, the sound of a falling body, and the frightened horses leaped forward. The wheels slipped over the edge of the narrow mountain road, and surrey, horses, and driver plunged a hundred feet down to the sharp, broken rocks below.

Johnson, hearing the shot, ran out and stumbled over a body lying in the road. By the bright moonlight he could see that it was that of his employer. The surrey was nowhere in sight, but he could easily make out where it had slipped over the precipice. He ran back into the shaft-house and began telephoning wildly to town.

CHAPTER XIII

STEVE OFFERS CONGRATULATIONS

When Fraser reached the dining-room for breakfast his immediate family had finished and departed. He had been up till four o'clock and his mother had let him sleep as long as he would. Now, at nine, he was up again and fresh as a daisy after a morning bath.

He found at the next table two other late breakfasters.

"Mo'ning, Miss Kinney. How are you, Tennessee?" he said amiably.

Both Larry and the young woman admitted good health, the latter so blushingly that Steve's keen eyes suggested to him that he might not be the only one with news to tell this morning.

"What's that I hear about Struve and Dunke?" asked Neill at once.

"Oh, you've heard it. Well, it's true. I judge Dunke was arranging to get him out of the country. Anyhow, Johnson says he took the fellow out to his surrey from the shaft-house of the Mal Pais under his gun. A moment later the engineer heard a shot and ran out. Dunke lay in the road dead,

with a knife through his heart. We found the surrey down in the canyon. It had gone over the edge of the road. Both the hawsses were dead, and Struve had disappeared. How the thing happened I reckon never will be known unless the convict tells it. My guess would be that Dunke attacked him and the convict was just a little bit more than ready for him."

"Have you any idea where Struve is?"

"The obvious guess would be that he is heading for Mexico. But I've got another notion. He knows that's where we will be looking for him. His record shows that he used to trail with a bunch of outlaws up in Wyoming. That was most twenty years ago. His old pals have disappeared long since. But he knows that country up there. He'll figure that down here he's sure to be caught and hanged sooner or later. Up there he'll have a chance to hide under another name."

Neill nodded. "That's a big country up there and the mountains are full of pockets. If he can reach there he will be safe."

"Maybe," the ranger amended quietly.

"Would you follow him?"

The officer's opaque gaze met the eyes of his friend. "We don't aim to let a prisoner make his getaway once we get our hands on him. Wyoming ain't so blamed far to travel after him—if I learn he is there."

For a moment all of them were silent. Each of

them was thinking of the fellow and the horrible trail of blood he had left behind him in one short week. Margaret looked at her lover and shuddered. She had not the least doubt that this man sitting opposite them would bring the criminal back to his punishment, but the sinister grotesque shadow of the convict seemed to fall between her and her happiness.

Larry caught her hand under the table and gave it a little pressure of reassurance. He spoke in a low voice. "This hasn't a thing to do with us, Peggy—not a thing. They were already both out of your life."

"Yes, I know, but——"

"There aren't any buts." He smiled warmly, and his smile took the other man into their confidence. "You've been having a nightmare. That's past. See the sunshine on those hills. It's bright mo'ning, girl. A new day for you and for me."

Steve grinned. "This is awful sudden, Tennessee. You must a-been sawing wood right industrious on the hawssback ride and down in the tunnel. I expect there wasn't any sunshine down there, was there?"

"You go to grass, Steve."

"No, Tennessee is ce'tainly no two-bit man. Lemme see. One—two—three—four days. That's surely going some," the ranger soliloquized.

"Mr. Fraser," the young woman reproved with a blush.

"Don't mind him, Peggy. He's merely jealous," came back Larry.

"Course I'm jealous. Whyfor not? What license have these Panhandle guys to come in and tote off our girls? But don't mind me. I'll pay strict attention to my ham and eggs and not see a thing that's going on."

"Lieutenant!" Miss Margaret was both embarrassed and shocked.

"Want me to shut my eyes, Tennessee?"

"Next time we get engaged you'll not be let in on the ground floor," Neill predicted.

"Four days! My, my! If that ain't rapid transit for fair!"

"You're a man of one idea, Steve. Cayn't you see that the fact's the main thing, not the time it took to make it one?"

"And counting out Sunday and Monday, it only leaves two days."

"Don't let that interfere with your breakfast. You haven't been elected timekeeper for this outfit, you know!"

Fraser recovered from his daze and duly offered congratulations to the one and hopes for unalloyed joy to the other party to the engagement.

"But four days!" he added in his pleasant drawl. "That's sure some precipitous. Just to look at him, ma'am" — this innocently to Peggy—"a man wouldn't think he had it in him to locate, stake out, and do the necessary assessment work on such a

rich claim as the Margaret Kinney all in four days. Mostly a fellow don't strike such high-grade ore without a lot of——"

"That will do for you, lieutenant," interrupted Miss Kinney, with merry, sparkling eyes. "You needn't think we're going to let you trail this off into a compliment now. I'm going to leave you and see what Mrs. Collins says. *She* won't sit there and parrot 'Four days' for the rest of her life."

With which Mistress Peggy sailed from the room in mock hauteur.

When Larry came back from closing the door after her, his friend fell upon him with vigorous hands to the amazement of Wun Hop, the waiter.

"You blamed lucky son of a gun," he cried exuberantly between punches. "You've ce'tainly struck pure gold, Tennessee. Looks like Old Man Good Luck has come home to roost with you, son."

The other, smiling, shook hands with him. "I'm of that opinion myself, Steve," he said.

Part II

THE GIRL OF LOST VALLEY

CHAPTER I

IN THE FIRE ZONE

"Say, you Teddy hawss, I'm plumb fed up with sagebrush and scenery. I kinder yearn for co'n bread and ham. I sure would give six bits for a drink of real wet water. Yore sentiments are similar, I reckon, Teddy."

The Texan patted the neck of his cow pony, which reached round playfully and pretended to nip his leg. They understood each other, and were now making the best of a very unpleasant situation. Since morning they had been lost on the desert. The heat of midday had found them plowing over sandy wastes. The declining sun had left them among the foothills, wandering from one to another, in the vain hope that each summit might show the silvery gleam of a windmill, or even that outpost of civilization, the barb-wire fence. And now the stars looked down indifferently, myriads of them, upon the travelers still plodding wearily through a land magically transformed by moonlight to a silvery loveliness that blotted out all the garish details of day.

The Texan drew rein. "We all been discovering

that Wyoming is a powerful big state. Going to feed me a cigarette, Teddy. Too bad a hawss cayn't smoke his troubles away," he drawled, and proceeded to roll a cigarette, lighting it with one sweeping motion of his arm, that passed down the leg of his chaps and ended in the upward curve at his lips.

The flame had not yet died, when faintly through the illimitable velvet night there drifted to him a sound.

"Did you hear that, pardner?" the man demanded softly, listening intently for a repetition of it.

It came presently, from away over to the left, and, after it, what might have been taken for the popping of a distant bunch of firecrackers.

"Celebrating the Fourth some premature, looks like. What? Think not, Teddy! Some one getting shot up? Sho! You are romancin', old hawss."

Nevertheless he swung the pony round and started rapidly in the direction of the shots. From time to time there came a renewal of them, though the intervals grew longer and the explosions were now individual ones. He took the precaution to draw his revolver from the holster and to examine it carefully.

"Nothing like being sure. It's a heap better than being sorry afterward," he explained to the cow pony.

For the first time in twelve hours, he struck a

road. Following this as it wound up to the summit of a hill, he discovered that the area of disturbance was in the valley below. For, as he began his descent, there was a flash from a clump of cottonwoods almost at his feet.

"Did yo' git him?" a voice demanded anxiously.

"Don't know, dad," the answer came, young, warm, and tremulous.

"Hello! There's a kid there," the Texan decided. Aloud, he asked quietly: "What's the row, gentlemen?"

One of the figures whirled—it was the boyish one, crouched behind a dead horse—and fired at him.

"Hold on, sonny! I'm a stranger. Don't make any more mistakes like that."

"Who are you?"

"Steve Fraser they call me. I just arrived from Texas. Wait a jiff, and I'll come down and explain."

He stayed for no permission, but swung from the saddle, trailed the reins, and started down the slope. He could hear a low-voiced colloquy between the two dark figures, and one of them called roughly:

"Hands up, friend! We'll take no chances on yo'."

The Texan's hands went up promptly, just as a bullet flattened itself against a rock behind him. It had been fired from the bank of the dry wash, some hundred and fifty yards away.

"That's no fair! Both sides oughtn't to plug at me," he protested, grinning.

The darkness which blurred detail melted as Fraser approached, and the moonlight showed him a tall, lank, unshaven old mountaineer, standing behind a horse, his shotgun thrown across the saddle.

"That's near enough, Mr. Fraser from Texas," said the old man, in a slow voice that carried the Southern intonation. "This old gun is loaded with buckshot, and she scatters like hell. Speak yore little piece. How came yo' here, right now?"

"I got lost in the Wind River bad lands this mo'ning, and I been playing hide and go seek with myself ever since."

"Where yo' haided for?"

"Gimlet Butte."

"Huh! That's right funny, too."

"Why?"

"Because all yo' got to do to reach the butte is to follow this road and yore nose for about three miles."

A bullet flung up a spurt of sand beside the horse.

The young fellow behind the dead horse broke in, with impatient alarm: "He's all right, dad. Can't you tell by his way of talking that he's from the South? Make him lie down."

Something sweet and vibrant in the voice lingered afterward in the Texan's mind almost like

a caress, but at the time he was too busy to think of this. He dropped behind a cottonwood, and drew his revolver.

"How many of them are there?" he asked of the lad, in a whisper.

"About six, I think. I'm sorry I shot at you."

"What's the row?"

"They followed us out of Gimlet Butte. They've been drinking. Isn't that some one climbing up the side of the ridge?"

"I believe it is. Let me have your rifle, kid."

"What for?" The youngster took careful aim, and fired.

A scream from the sagebrush—just one, and then no more.

"Bully for you', Arlie," the old man said.

None of them spoke for some minutes, then Fraser heard a sob—a stifled one, but unmistakable none the less.

"Don't be afraid, kid. We'll stand 'em off," the Texan encouraged.

"I ain't afraid, but I—I——Oh, God, I've killed a man."

The Texan stared at him, where he lay in the heavy shadows, shaken with his remorse. "Holy smoke! Wasn't he aiming to kill you? He likely isn't dead, anyhow. You got real troubles to worry about, without making up any."

He could see the youngster shaking with the horror of it, and could hear the staccato sobs

forcing themselves through the closed teeth. Something about it, some touch of pathos he could not account for, moved his not very accessible heart. After all, he was a slim little kid to be engaged in such a desperate encounter. Fraser remembered his own boyhood and the first time he had ever seen bloodshed, and, recalling it, he slipped across in the darkness and laid an arm across the slight shoulder.

"Don't you worry, kid. It's all right. You didn't mean——"

He broke off in swift, unspeakable amazement. His eye traveled up the slender figure from the telltale skirt. This was no boy at all, but a girl. As he took in the mass of blue-black hair and the soft but clean-cut modeling from ear to chin, his hand fell from her shoulder. What an idiot he had been not to know from the first that such a voice could have come only from a woman! He had been deceived by the darkness and by the slouch hat she wore. He wanted to laugh in sardonic scorn of his perception.

But on the heel of that came a realization of her danger. He must get her out of there at once, for he knew that the enemy must be circling round, to take them on the flank too. It was not a question of whether they could hold off the attackers. They might do that, and yet she might be killed while they were doing it. A man used to coping with

emergencies, his brain now swiftly worked out a way of escape.

"Yore father and I will take care of these coyotes. You slip along those shadows up the hill to where my Teddy hawss is, and burn the wind out of here," he told her.

"I'll not leave dad," she said quickly.

The old mountaineer behind the horse laughed apologetically. "I been trying to git her to go, but she won't stir. With the pinto daid, o' course we couldn't both make it."

"That's plumb foolishness," the Texan commented irritably.

"Mebbe," admitted the girl; "but I reckon I'll stay long as dad does."

"No use being pigheaded about it."

Her dark eyes flashed. "Is this your say-so, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is?" she asked sharply, less because she resented what he said than because she was strung to a wire edge.

His troubled gaze took in again her slim girlishness. The frequency of danger had made him proof against fear for himself, but just now he was very much afraid for her. Hard man as he was, he had the Southerner's instinctive chivalry toward woman.

"You better go, Arlie," her father counseled weakly.

"Well, I won't," she retorted emphatically.

The old man looked whimsically at the Texan. "Yo' see yo'self how it is, stranger."

Fraser saw, and the girl's stanchness stirred his admiration even while it irritated him. He made his decision immediately.

"All right. Both of you go."

"But we have only one horse," the girl objected. "They would catch us."

"Take my Teddy."

"And leave you here?" The dark eyes were full on him again, this time in a wide-open surprise.

"Oh, I'll get out once you're gone. No trouble about that."

"How?"

"We couldn't light out, and leave yo' here," the father interrupted.

"Of course we couldn't," the girl added quickly. "It isn't your quarrel, anyhow."

"What good can you do staying here?" argued Fraser. "They want you, not me. With you gone, I'll slip away or come to terms with them. They haven't a thing against me."

"That's right," agreed the older man, rubbing his stubbly beard with his hand. "That's sho'ly right."

"But they might get you before they understood," Arlie urged.

"Oh, I'll keep under cover, and when it's time, I'll sing out and let them know. Better leave me that rifle, though." He went right on, taking it

for granted that she had consented to go: "Slip through those shadows up that draw. You'll have no trouble with Teddy. Whistle when you're ready, and your father will make a break up the hill on his hawss. So-long. See you later some time, mebbe."

She went reluctantly, not convinced, but overborne by the quality of cheerful compulsion that lay in him. He was not a large man, though the pack and symmetry of his muscles promised unusual strength. But the close-gripped jaw, the cool serenity of the gray eyes that looked without excitement upon whatever they saw, the perfect poise of his carriage—all contributed to a personality plainly that of a leader of men.

It was scarce a minute later that the whistle came from the hilltop. The mountaineer instantly swung to the saddle and set his pony to a canter up the draw. Fraser could see him join his daughter in the dim light, for the moon had momentarily gone behind a cloud, but almost at once the darkness swallowed them.

Some one in the sagebrush called to a companion, and the Texan knew that the attackers had heard the sound of the galloping horses. Without waiting an instant, he fired twice in rapid succession.

"That'll hold them for a minute or two," he told himself. "They won't understand it, and they'll get together and have a powwow."

He crouched behind the dead horse, his gaze sweeping the wash, the sagebrush, and the distant group of cottonwoods from which he had seen a shot fired. Though he lay absolutely still, without the least visible excitement, he was alert and tense to the finger tips. Not the slightest sound, not the smallest motion of the moonlit underbrush, escaped his unwavering scrutiny.

The problem before him was to hold the attackers long enough for Arlie and her father to make their escape, without killing any of them or getting killed himself. He knew that, once out of the immediate vicinity, the fugitives would leave the road and take to some of the canyons that ran from the foothills into the mountains. If he could secure them a start of fifteen minutes that ought to be enough.

A voice from the wash presently hailed him:

"See here! We're going to take you back with us, old man. That's a cinch. We want you for that Squaw Creek raid, and we're going to have you. You done enough damage. Better surrender peaceable, and we'll promise to take you back to jail. What say?"

"Gimme five minutes to think it over," demanded the Texan.

"All right, five minutes. But you want to remember that it's all off with you if you don't give up. Billy Faulkner's dead, and we'll sure come a-shooting."

Fraser waited till his five minutes was nearly up, then plunged across the road into the sagebrush growing thick there. A shot or two rang out, without stopping him. Suddenly a man rose out of the sage in front of him, a revolver in his hand.

For a fraction of a second, the two men faced each other before either spoke.

"Who are you?"

Fraser's answer was to dive for the man's knees, just as a football tackle does. They went down together, but it was the Texan got up first. A second man was running toward him.

"Hands up, there!" the newcomer ordered.

Fraser's hand went up, but with his forty-five in it. The man pitched forward into the sage. The Southerner twisted forward again, slid down into the dry creek, and ran along its winding bed for a hundred yards. Then he left it, cutting back toward the spot where he had lain behind the dead horse. Hiding in the sage, he heard the pursuit pouring down the creek, waited till it was past, and quickly recrossed the road. Here, among the cow-backed hills, he knew he was as safe as a needle in a haystack.

"I had to get that anxious guy, but it might have been a whole lot worse. I only plugged his laig for him," he reflected comfortably. "Wonder why they wanted to collect the old man's scalp, anyhow? The little girl sure was game. Just like a woman,

though, the way she broke down because she hit that fellow."

Within five minutes he was lost again among the thousand hills that rose like waves of the sea, one after another. It was not till nearly morning that he again struck a road.

He was halted abruptly by a crisp command from behind a bowlder:

"Up with your hands—quick!"

"Who are you, my friend?" the Texan asked mildly.

"Deputy sheriff," was the prompt response. "Now, reach for the sky, and prompt, too."

"Just as you say. You've ce'tainly got the crawl on me."

The deputy disarmed his captive, and drove him into town before him. When morning dawned, Fraser found himself behind the bars. He was arrested for the murder of Faulkner.

CHAPTER II

A COMPACT

After the jailer had brought his breakfast, Fraser was honored by a visit from the sheriff, a big, rawboned Westerner, with the creases of fifty outdoor years stamped on his brown, leathery face.

He greeted his prisoner pleasantly enough, and sat down on the bed.

"Treating you right, are they?" he asked, glancing around. "Breakfast up to the mark?"

"I've got no kick coming, thank you," said Fraser.

"Good!"

The sheriff relapsed into sombre silence. There was a troubled look in the keen eyes that the Texan did not understand. Fraser waited for the officer to develop the object of his visit, and it was set down to his credit. A weaker man would have rushed at once into excuses and explanations. But in the prisoner's quiet, steely eyes, in the close-shut mouth and salient jaw, in the set of his well-knit figure, Sheriff Brandt found small room for weakness. Whoever he was, this man was one who could hold his own in the strenuous game of life.

"My friend," said the sheriff abruptly, "you and I are up against it. There is going to be trouble in town to-night."

The level, gray eyes looked questioningly at the sheriff.

"You butted into grief a-plenty when you lined up with the cattlemen in this sheep war. Who do you ride for?"

"I'm not riding for anybody," responded Fraser. "I just arrived from Texas. Didn't even know there was a feud on."

Brandt laughed incredulously. "That will sound good to a jury, if your case ever comes to that stage. How do you expect to explain Billy Faulkner's death?"

"Is there any proof I killed him?"

"Some. You were recognized by two men last night while you were trying to escape. You carried a rifle that uses the same weight bullet as the one we dug out of Billy. When you attacked Tom Peake you dropped that rifle, and in your getaway hadn't time to pick it up again. That is evidence enough for a Wyoming jury, in the present state of public opinion."

"What do you mean by 'in the present state of public opinion'?"

"I mean that this whole country is pretty nearly solid against the Cedar Mountain cattlemen, since they killed Campeau and Jennings in that raid on

their camp. You know what I mean as well as I do."

Fraser did not argue the point. He remembered now having seen an account of the Squaw Creek raid on a sheep camp, ending in a battle that had resulted in the death of two men and the wounding of three others. He had been sitting in a hotel at San Antonio, Texas, when he had read the story over his after-dinner cigar. The item had not seemed even remotely connected with himself. Now he was in prison at Gimlet Butte, charged with murder, and unless he was very much mistaken the sheriff was hinting at a lynching. The Squaw Creek raid had come very near to him, for he knew the fight he had interrupted last night had grown out of it.

"What do you mean by trouble to-night?" he asked, in an even, conversational tone.

The sheriff looked directly at him. "You're a man, I reckon. That calls for the truth. Men are riding up and down this country to-day, stirring up sentiment against your outfit. To-night the people will gather in town, and the jail will be attacked."

"And you?"

"I'll uphold the law as long as I can."

Fraser nodded. He knew Brandt spoke the simple truth. What he had sworn to do he would do to the best of his ability. But the Texan knew,

too, that the ramshackle jail would be torn to pieces and the sheriff overpowered.

From his coat pocket he drew a letter, and presented it to the other. "I didn't expect to give this to you under these circumstances, Mr. Brandt, but I'd like you to know that I'm on the level when I say I don't know any of the Squaw Creek cattlemen and have never ridden for any outfit in this State."

Brandt tore open the letter, and glanced hurriedly through it. "Why, it's from old Sam Slauson! We used to ride herd together when we were boys." And he real aloud:

"Introducing Steve Fraser, lieutenant in the Texas Rangers."

He glanced up quickly. "You're not the Fraser that ran down Chacon and his gang of murderers?"

"Yes, I was on that job."

Brandt shook hands heartily. "They say it was a dandy piece of work. I read that story in a magazine. You delivered the goods proper."

The ranger was embarrassed. "Oh, it wasn't much of a job. The man that wrote it put in the fancy touches, to make his story sell, I expect."

"Yes, he did! I know all about that!" the sheriff derided. "I've got to get you out of this hole somehow. Do you mind if I send for Hilliard, the prosecuting attorney? He's a bright young fellow, loaded to the guards with ideas. What I

want is to get at a legal way of fixing this thing up, you understand. I'll call him up on the phone, and have him run over."

Hilliard was shortly on the spot—a short, fat little fellow with eyeglasses. He did not at first show any enthusiasm in the prisoner's behalf.

"I don't doubt for a moment that you are the man this letter says you are, Mr. Fraser," he said suavely. "But facts are stubborn things. You were seen carrying the gun that killed Faulkner. We can't get away from that just because you happen to have a letter of introduction to Mr. Brandt."

"I don't want to get away from it," retorted Fraser. "I have explained how I got into the fight. A man doesn't stand back and see two people, and one of them a girl, slaughtered by seven or eight."

The lawyer's fat forefinger sawed the air. "That's how you put it. Mind, I don't for a moment say it isn't the right way. But what the public wants is *proof*. Can you give evidence to show that Faulkner and his friends attacked Dillon and his daughter? Have you even got them on hand here to support your statement? Have you got a grain of evidence, apart from your bare word?"

"That letter shows——"

"It shows nothing. You might have written it yourself last night. Anyhow, a letter of introduction isn't quite an excuse for murder."

"It wasn't murder."

"That's what you say. I'll be glad to have you prove it."

"They followed Dillon—if that is his name—out of town."

"*They* put it that they were on their way home, when they were attacked."

"By an old man and his daughter," the Texan added significantly.

"There again we have only your statement for it. Half a dozen men had been in town during the day from the Cedar Mountain district. These men were witnesses in the suit that rose over a sheep raid. They may all have been on the spot, to ambush Faulkner's crowd."

Brandt broke in: "Are you personally convinced that this gentleman is Lieutenant Fraser of the Rangers?"

"Personally, I am of opinion that he is, but——"

"Hold your horses, Dave. Believing that, do you think that we ought to leave him here to be lynched to-night by Peake's outfit?"

"That isn't my responsibility, but speaking merely as a private citizen, I should say, No."

"What would you do with him then?"

"Why not take him up to your house?"

"Wouldn't be safe a minute, or in any other house in town."

"Then get out of town with him."

"It can't be done. I'm watched."

Hilliard shrugged.

The ranger's keen eyes went from one to another. He saw that what the lawyer needed was some personal interest to convert him into a partisan. From his pocket he drew another letter and some papers.

"If you doubt that I am Lieutenant Fraser you can wire my captain at Dallas. This is a letter of congratulation to me from the Governor of Texas for my work in the Chacon case. Here's my railroad ticket, and my lodge receipt. You gentlemen are the officers in charge. I hold you personally responsible for my safety—for the safety of a man whose name, by chance, is now known all over this country."

This was a new phase of the situation, and it went home to the lawyer's mind at once. He had been brought into the case willy nilly, and he would be blamed for anything that happened to this young Texan, whose deeds had recently been exploited broadcast in the papers. He stood for an instant in frowning thought, and as he did so a clause in the letter from the Governor of Texas caught and held his eye.

. . . which I regard as the ablest, most daring, and, at the same time, the most difficult and most successful piece of secret service that has come to my knowledge. . . .

Suddenly, Hilliard saw the way out—a way that appealed to him none the less because it would also serve his own ambitions.

"Neither you nor I have any right to help this gentleman to escape, sheriff. The law is plain. He is charged with murder. We haven't any right to let our private sympathies run away with us. But there is one thing we can do."

"What is that?" the sheriff asked.

"Let him earn his freedom."

"Earn it! How?"

"By serving the State in this very matter of the Squaw Creek raid. As prosecuting attorney, it is in my discretion to accept the service of an accomplice to a crime in fixing the guilt upon the principals. Before the law, Lieutenant Fraser stands accused of complicity. We believe him not guilty, but that does not affect the situation. Let him go up into the Cedar Mountain country and find out the guilty parties in the Squaw Creek raid."

"And admit my guilt by compromising with you?" the Texan scoffed.

"Not at all. You need not go publicly. In point of fact, you couldn't get out of town alive if it were known. No, we'll arrange to let you break jail on condition that you go up into the Lost Canyon district, and run down the murderers of Campeau and Jennings. That gives us an excuse for letting you go. You see the point—don't you?"

The Texan grinned. "That isn't *quite* the point, is it?" he drawled. "If I should be successful, you

will achieve a reputation, without any cost to yourself. That's worth mentioning."

Hilliard showed a momentary embarrassment.

"That's incidental. Besides, it will help your reputation more than mine."

Brandt got busy at once with the details of the escape. "We'll loosen up the mortar round the bars in the south room. They are so rickety anyhow I haven't kept any prisoners there for years. After you have squeezed through you will find a horse saddled in the draw, back here. You'll want a gun of course."

"Always providing Lieutenant Fraser consents to the arrangement," the lawyer added smoothly.

"Oh, I'll consent," laughed Fraser wryly. "I have no option. Of course, if I win I get the reward—whatever it is."

"Oh, of course."

"Then I'm at your service, gentlemen, to escape whenever you say the word."

"The best time would be right after lunch. That would give you five hours before Nichols was in here again," the sheriff suggested.

"Suppose you draw a map, showing the route I'm to follow to reach Cedar Mountain. I reckon I had better not trouble folks to ask them the way." And the Texan grinned.

"That's right. I'll fix you up, and tell you later just where you'll find the horse," Brandt answered.

"You're an officer yourself, lieutenant," said the

lawyer. "You know just how much evidence it takes to convict. Well, that's just how much we want. If you have to communicate with us, address 'T. L. Meredith, Box 117.' Better send your letter in cipher. Here's a little code I worked out that we sometimes use. Well, so-long. Good hunting, lieutenant."

Fraser nodded farewell, but did not offer to shake hands.

Brandt lingered for an instant. "Don't make any mistake, Fraser, about this job you've bit off. It's a big one, and don't you forget it. People are sore on me because I have fallen down on it. I can't help it. I just can't get the evidence. If you tackle it, you'll be in danger from start to finish. There are some bad men in this country, and the worst of them are lying low in Lost Valley."

The ranger smiled amiably. "Where is this Lost Valley?"

"Somewhere up in the Cedar Mountain district. I've never been there. Few men have, for it is not easy to find; and even if it were strangers are not invited."

"Well, I'll have to invite myself."

"That's all right. But remember this. There are men up there who would drill holes in a dying man. I guess Lost Valley is the country God forgot."

"Sounds right interesting."

"You'll find it all that, and don't forget that if they find out what you are doing there, it will be God help Steve Fraser!"

The ranger's eyes gleamed. "I'll try to remember it."

CHAPTER III

INTO LOST VALLEY

It was one-twenty when Fraser slipped the iron bar from the masonry into which it had been fixed and began to lower himself from the window. The back of the jail faced on the bank of a creek; and into the aspens, which ran along it at this point in a little grove, the fugitive pushed his way. He descended to the creek edge and crossed the mountain stream on bowlders which filled its bed. From here he followed the trail for a hundred yards that led up the little river. On the way he passed a boy fishing and nodded a greeting to him.

"What time is it, mister?" the youngster asked.

A glance at his watch showed the Texan that it was one-twenty-five.

"The fish have quit biting. Blame it all, I'm going home. Say, mister, Jimmie Spence says they're going to lynch that fellow who killed Billy Faulkner—going to hang him to-night, Jimmie says. Do you reckon they will?"

"No, I reckon not."

"Tha's what I told him, but Jimmie says he heard

Tom Peake say so. Jimmie says this town will be full o' folks by night."

Without waiting to hear any more of Jimmie's prophecies, Fraser followed the trail till it reached a waterfall Brandt had mentioned, then struck sharply to the right. In a little bunch of scrub oaks he found a saddled horse tied to a sapling. His instructions were to cross the road, which ran parallel with the stream, and follow the gulch that led to the river. Half an hour's travel brought him to another road. Into this he turned, and followed it.

In a desperate hurry though he was, Steve dared not show it. He held his piebald broncho to the ambling trot a cowpony naturally drops into. From his coat pocket he flashed a mouthharp for use in emergency.

Presently he met three men riding into town. They nodded at him, in the friendly, casual way of the outdoors West. The gait of the pony was a leisurely walk, and its rider was industriously executing, "I Met My Love In the Alamo."

"Going the wrong way, aren't you?" one of the three suggested.

"Don't you worry, I'll be there when y'u hang that guy they caught last night," he told them with a grin.

From time to time he met others. All travel seemed to be headed townward. There was excitement in the air. In the clear atmosphere voices

carried a long way, and all the conversation that came to him was on the subjects of the war for the range, the battle of the previous evening, and the lynching scheduled to take place in a few hours. He realized that he had escaped none too soon, for it was certain that as the crowd in town multiplied, they would set a watch on the jail to prevent Brandt from slipping out with his prisoner.

About four miles from town he cut the telephone wires, for he knew that as soon as his escape became known to the jailer, the sheriff would be notified, and he would telephone in every direction the escape of his prisoner, just the same as if there had been no arrangement between them. It was certain, too, that all the roads leading from Gimlet Butte would be followed and patrolled immediately. For which reason he left the road after cutting the wires, and took to the hill trail marked out for him in the map furnished by Brandt.

By night, he was far up in the foothills. Close to a running stream, he camped in a little, grassy park, where his pony could find forage. Brandt had stuffed his saddlebags with food, and had tied behind a sack, with a feed or two of oats for his horse. Fraser had ridden the range too many years to risk lighting a fire, even though he had put thirty-five miles between him and Gimlet Butte. The night was chill, as it always is in that altitude, but he rolled up in his blanket, got what sleep he could, and was off again by daybreak.

Before noon he was high in the mountain passes, from which he could sometimes look down into the green parks where nested the little ranches of small cattlemen. He knew now that he was beyond the danger of the first hurried pursuit, and that it was more than likely that any of these mountaineers would hide him rather than give him up. Nevertheless, he had no immediate intention of putting them to the test.

The second night came down on him far up on Dutchman Creek, in the Cedar Mountain district. He made a bed, where his horse found a meal, in a haystack of a small ranch, the buildings of which were strung along the creek. He was weary, and he slept deep. When he awakened next morning, it was to hear the sound of men's voices. They drifted to him from the road in front of the house.

Carefully he looked down from the top of his stack upon three horsemen talking to the bare-headed ranchman whom they had called out from his breakfast.

"No, I ain't seen a thing of him. Shot Billy Faulkner, you say? What in time for?" the rancher was innocently asking.

"You know what for, Hank Speed," the leader of the posse made sullen answer. "Well, boys, we better be pushing on, I expect."

Fraser breathed freer when they rode out of sight. He had overslept, and had had a narrow shave; for his pony was grazing in the alfalfa field

within a hundred yards of them at that moment. No sooner had the posse gone than Hank Speed stepped across the field without an instant's hesitation and looked the animal over, after which he returned to the house and came out again with a rifle in his hands.

The ranger slid down the farther side of the stack and slipped his revolver from its holster. He watched the ranchman make a tour of the outbuildings very carefully and cautiously, then make a circuit of the haystack at a safe distance. Soon the rancher caught sight of the man crouching against it.

"Oh, you're there, are you? Put up that gun. I ain't going to do you any harm."

"What's the matter with you putting yours up first?" asked the Texan amiably.

"I tell you I ain't going to hurt you. Soon as I stepped out of the house I seen your horse. All I had to do was to say so, and they would have had you slick."

"What did you get your gun for then?"

"I ain't taking any chances till folks' intentions has been declared. You might have let drive at me before I got a show to talk to you."

"All right. I'll trust you." Fraser dropped his revolver, and the other came across to him.

"Up in this country we ain't in mourning for Billy Faulkner. Old man Dillon told me what you

done for him. I reckon we can find cover for you till things quiet down. My name is Speed."

"Call me Fraser."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Fraser. I reckon we better move you back into the timber a bit. Deputy sheriffs are some thick around here right now. If you have to lie hid up in this country for a spell, we'll make an arrangement to have you taken care of."

"I'll have to lie hid. There's no doubt about that. I made my jail break just in time to keep from being invited as chief guest to a necktie party."

"Well, we'll put you where the whole United States Army couldn't find you."

They had been walking across the field and now crawled between the strands of fence wire.

"I left my saddle on top of the stack," the ranger explained.

"I'll take care of it. You better take cover on top of this ridge till I get word to Dillon you're here. My wife will fix you up some breakfast, and I'll bring it out."

"I've ce'tainly struck the good Samaritan," the Texan smiled.

"Sho! There ain't a man in the hills wouldn't do that much for a friend."

"I'm glad I have so many friends I never saw."

"Friends? The hills are full of them. You took a hand when old man Dillon and his girl were

sure up against it. Cedar Mountain stands together these days. What you did for them was done for us all," Speed explained simply.

Fraser waited on the ridge till his host brought breakfast of bacon, biscuits, hard-boiled eggs, and coffee. While he ate, Speed sat down on a bowlder beside him and talked.

"I sent my boy with a note to Dillon. It's a good thirty miles from here, and the old man won't make it back till some time to-morrow. Course, you're welcome at the house, but I judge it wouldn't be best for you to be seen there. No knowing when some of Brandt's deputies might butt in with a warrant. You can slip down again after dark and burrow in the haystack. Eh? What think?

"I'm in your hands, but I don't want to put you and your friends to so much trouble. Isn't there some mountain trail off the beaten road that I could take to Dillon's ranch, and so save him from the trip after me?"

Speed grinned. "Not in a thousand years, my friend. Dillon's ranch ain't to be found, except by them that know every pocket of these hills like their own back yard. I'll guarantee you couldn't find it in a month, unless you had a map locating it."

"Must be in that Lost Valley, which some folks say is a fairy tale," the ranger said carelessly, but with his eyes on the other.

The cattleman made no comment. It occurred

to Fraser that his remark had stirred some suspicion of him. At least, it suggested caution.

"If you're through with your breakfast, I'll take back the dishes," Speed said dryly.

The day wore to sunset. After dark had fallen the Texan slipped through the alfalfa field again and bedded in the stack. Before the morning was more than gray he returned to the underbrush of the ridge. His breakfast finished, and Speed gone, he lay down on a great flat, sun-dappled rock, and looked into the unflecked blue sky. The season was spring, and the earth seemed fairly palpitating with young life. The low, tireless hum of insects went on all about him. The air was vocal with the notes of nesting birds. Away across the valley he could see a mountain slope, with snow gulches glowing pink in the dawn. Little checkerboard squares along the river showed irrigated patches. In the pleasant warmth he grew drowsy. His eyes closed, opened, closed again.

He was conscious of no sound that awakened him, yet he was aware of a presence that drew him from drowsiness to an alert attention. Instinctively, his hand crept to his scabbarded weapon.

"Don't shoot me," a voice implored with laughter—a warm, vivid voice, that struck pleasantly on his memory.

The Texan turned lazily, and leaned on his elbow. She came smiling out of the brush, light as a roe, and with much of its slim, supple grace.

Before, he had seen her veiled by night; the day disclosed her a dark, spirited young creature. The mass of blueblack hair coiled at the nape of the brown neck, the flash of dark eyes beneath straight, dark eyebrows, together with a certain deliberation of movement that was not languor, made it impossible to doubt that she was a Southerner by inheritance, if not by birth.

"I don't reckon I will," he greeted, smiling. "Down in Texas it ain't counted right good manners to shoot up young ladies."

"And in Wyoming you think it is."

"I judge by appearances, ma'am."

"Then you judge wrong. Those men did not know I was with dad that night. They thought I was another man. You see, they had just lost their suit for damages against dad and some more for the loss of six hundred sheep in a raid last year. They couldn't prove who did it." She flamed into a sudden passion of resentment. "I don't defend them any. They are a lot of coyotes, or they wouldn't have attacked two men, riding alone."

He ventured a rapier thrust. "How about the Squaw Creek raid? Don't your friends sometimes forget to fight fair, too?"

He had stamped the fire out of her in an instant. She drooped visibly. "Yes—yes, they do," she faltered. "I don't defend them, either. Dad had nothing to do with that. He doesn't shoot in the back."

"I'm glad to hear it," he retorted cheerfully. "And I'm glad to hear that your friends the enemy didn't know it was a girl they were attacking. Fact is, I thought you were a boy myself when first I happened in and you fanned me with your welcome."

"I didn't know. I hadn't time to think. So I let fly. But I was so excited I likely missed you a mile."

He took off his felt hat and examined with interest a bullet hole through the rim. "If it was a mile, I'd hate to have you miss me a hundred yards," he commented, with a little ripple of laughter.

"I didn't! Did I? As near as that?" She caught her hands together in a sudden anguish for what might have been.

"Don't you care, ma'am. A miss is as good as a mile. It ain't the first time I've had my hat ventilated. I mentioned it, so you wouldn't get discouraged at your shooting. It's plenty good. Good enough to suit me. I wouldn't want it any better."

"What about the man I wounded?" she asked apprehensively. "Is he—is it all right?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" He could see the terror in her eyes.

"How it all came out?"

He could not tell why he did it, any more than

he could tell why he had attempted no denial to the sheriff of responsibility for the death of Faulkner, but as he looked at this girl he shifted the burden from her shoulders to his. "You got your man in the ankle. I had worse luck after you left. They buried mine."

"Oh!" From her lips a little cry of pain forced itself. "It wasn't your fault. It was for us you did it. Oh, why did they attack us?"

"I did what I had to do. There is no blame due either you or me for it," he said, with quiet conviction.

"I know. But it seems so dreadful. And then they put you in jail—and you broke out! Wasn't that it?"

"That was the way of it, Miss Arlie. How did you know?"

"Henry Speed's note to father said you had broken jail. Dad wasn't at home. You know, the round-up is on now and he has to be there. So I saddled, and came right away."

"That was right good of you."

"Wasn't it?" There was a softened, almost tender, jeer in her voice. "Since you only saved our lives!"

"I ain't claiming all that, Miss Arlie."

"Then I'll claim it for you. I suppose you gave yourself up to them and explained how it was after we left."

"Not exactly that. I managed to slip away through the sage. It was mo'ning before I found the road again. Soon as I did, a deputy tagged me, and said, 'You're mine.' He spoke for me so prompt and seemed so sure about what he was saying, I didn't argue the matter with him." He laughed gayly.

"And then?"

"Then he herded me to town, and I was invited to be the county's guest. Not liking the accommodations, I took the first chance and flew the coop. They missed a knife in my pocket when they searched me, and I chipped the cement away from the window bars, let myself down by the bed-linen, and borrowed a cow-pony I found saddled at the edge of town. So, you see, I'm a hawss thief too, ma'am."

She could not take it so lightly as he did, even though she did not know that he had barely escaped with his life. Something about his debonair, smiling hardihood touched her imagination, as did also the virile competence of the man. If the cool eyes in his weatherbeaten face could be hard as agates, they could also light up with sparkling imps of mischief. Certainly he was no boy, but the close-cut waves of crisp, reddish hair and the ready smile contributed to an impression of youth that came and went.

"Willie Speed is saddling you a horse. The one

you came on has been turned loose to go back when it wants to. I'm going to take you home with me," she told him.

"Well, I'm willing to be kidnapped."

"I brought your horse Teddy. If you like, you may ride that, and I'll take the other."

"Yore a gentleman, ma'am. I sure would."

When Arlie saw with what pleasure the friends met, how Teddy nickered and rubbed his nose up and down his master's coat and how the Texan put him through his little repertoire of tricks and fed him a lump of sugar from his coat pocket, she was glad she had ridden Teddy instead of her own pony to the meeting.

They took the road without loss of time. Arlie Dillon knew exactly how to cross this difficult region. She knew the Cedar Mountain district as a grade teacher knows her arithmetic. In daylight or in darkness, with or without a trail, she could have traveled almost a bee line to the point she wanted. Her life had been spent largely in the saddle—at least that part of it which had been lived outdoors. Wherefore she was able to lead her guest by secret trails that wound in and out among the passes and through unsuspected gorges to hazardous descents possible only to goats and cow ponies. No stranger finding his way in would have stood a chance of getting out again unaided.

Among these peaks lay hidden pockets and caches by hundreds, rock fissures which made the country

a very maze to the uninitiated. The ranger, himself one of the best trailers in Texas, doubted whether he could retrace his steps to the Speed place.

After several hours of travel, they emerged from a gulch to a little valley known as Beaver Dam Park. The girl pointed out to her companion a narrow brown ribbon that wound through the park.

"There's the road again. That's the last we shall see of it—or it will be when we have crossed it. Once we reach the Twin Buttes that are the gateway to French Cañon you are perfectly safe. You can see the buttes from here. No, farther to the right."

"I thought I'd ridden some tough trails in my time, but this country ce'tainly takes the cake," Fraser said admiringly, as his gaze swept the horizon. "It puts it over anything I ever met up with. Ain't that right, Teddy hawss?"

The girl flushed with pleasure at his praise. She was mountain bred, and she loved the country of the great peaks.

They descended the valley, crossed the road, and in an open grassy spot just beyond, came plump upon four men who had unsaddled to eat lunch.

The meeting came too abruptly for Arlie to avoid it. One glance told her that they were deputies from Gimlet Butte. Without the least hesitation she rode forward and gave them the casual greeting of cattleland. Fraser, riding beside her, nodded coolly, drew to a halt, and lit a cigarette.

"Found him yet, gentlemen?" he asked.

"No, nor we ain't likely to, if he's reached this far," one of the men answered.

"It *would* be some difficult to collect him here," the Texan admitted impartially.

"Among his friends," one of the deputies put in, with a snarl.

Fraser laughed easily. "Oh, well, we ain't his enemies, though he ain't very well known in the Cedar Mountain country. What might he be like, pardner?"

"Hasn't he lived up here long?" asked one of the men, busy with some bacon over a fire.

"They say not."

"He's a heavy-set fellow, with reddish hair; not so tall as you, I reckon, and some heavier. Was wearing chaps and gauntlets when he made his getaway. From the description, he looks something like you, I shouldn't wonder."

Fraser congratulated himself that he had had the foresight to discard as many as possible of these helps to identification before he was three miles from Gimlet Butte. Now he laughed pleasantly.

"Sure he's heavier than me, and not so tall."

"It would be a good joke, Bud, if they took *you* back to town for this man," cut in Arlie, troubled at the direction the conversation was taking, but not obviously so.

"I ain't objecting any, sis. About three days of

the joys of town would sure agree with my run-down system," the Texan answered joyously.

"When you cowpunchers do get in, you surely make Rome howl," one of the deputies agreed, with a grin. "Been in to the Butte lately?"

The Texan met his grin. "It ain't been so long."

"Well, you ain't liable to get in again for a while," Arlie said emphatically. "Come on, Bud, we've got to be moving."

"Which way is Dead Cow Creek?" one of the men called after them.

Fraser pointed in the direction from which he had just come.

After they had ridden a hundred yards, the girl laughed aloud her relief at their escape. "If they go the way you pointed for Dead Cow Creek, they will have to go clear round the world to get to it. We're headed for the creek now."

"A fellow can't always guess right," pleaded the Texan. "If he could, what a fiend he would be at playing the wheel! Shall I go back and tell him I misremembered for a moment where the creek is?"

"No, sir. You had me scared badly enough when you drew their attention to yourself. Why did you do it?"

"It was the surest way to disarm any suspicion they might have had. One of them had just said the man they wanted was like me. Presently, one would have been guessing that it *was* me." He

looked at her drolly, and added: "You played up to me fine, sis."

A touch of deeper color beat into her dusky cheeks. "We'll drop the relationship right now, if you please. I said only what you made me say," she told him, a little stiffly.

But presently she relaxed to the note of friendliness, even of comradeship, habitual to her. She was a singularly frank creature, having been brought up in a country where women were few and far, and where conventions were of the simplest. Otherwise, she would not have confessed to him with unconscious näiveté, as she now did, how greatly she had been troubled for him before she received the note from Speed.

"It worried me all the time, and it troubled dad, too. I could see that. We had hardly left you before I knew we had done wrong. Dad did it for me, of course; but he felt mighty bad about it. Somehow, I couldn't think of anything but you there, with all those men shooting at you. Suppose you had waited too long before surrendering! Suppose you had been killed for us!" She looked at him, and felt a shiver run over her in the warm sunlight. "Night before last I was worn out. I slept some, but I kept dreaming they were killing you. Oh, you don't know how glad I was to get word from Speed that you were alive." Her soft voice had the gift of expressing feeling, and it was resonant with it now.

"I'm glad you were glad," he said quietly.

Across Dead Cow Creek they rode, following the stream up French Cañon to what was known as the Narrows. Here the great rock walls, nearly two thousand feet high, came so close together as to leave barely room for a footpath beside the creek which boiled down over great bowlders. Unexpectedly, there opened in the wall a rock fissure, and through this Arlie guided her horse.

The Texan wondered where she could be taking him, for the fissure terminated in a great rock slide some two hundred yards ahead of them. Before reaching this she turned sharply to the left, and began winding in and out among the big bowlders which had fallen from the summit far above.

Presently Fraser observed with astonishment that they were following a path that crept up the very face of the bluff. Up—up—up they went until they reached a rift in the wall, and into this the trail went precipitously. Stones clattered down from the hoofs of the horses as they clambered up like mountain goats. Once the Texan had to throw himself to the ground to keep Teddy from falling backward.

Arlie, working her pony forward with voice and body and knees, so that from her seat in the saddle she seemed literally to lift him up, reached the summit and looked back.

"All right back there?" she asked quietly.

"All right," came the cheerful answer. "Teddy

isn't used to climbing up a wall, but he'll make it or know why."

A minute later, man and horse were beside her.

"Good for Teddy," she said, fondling his nose.

"Look out! He doesn't like strangers to handle him."

"We're not strangers. We're *tillicums*. Aren't we, Teddy?"

Teddy said "Yes" after the manner of a horse, as plain as words could say it.

From their feet the trail dropped again to another gorge, beyond which the ranger could make out a stretch of valley through which ran the gleam of a silvery thread.

"We're going down now into Mantrap Gulch. The patch of green you see beyond is Lost Valley," she told him.

"Lost Valley," he repeated, in amazement. "Are we going to Lost Valley?"

"You've named our destination."

"But—you don't live in Lost Valley."

"Don't I?"

"Do you?"

"Yes," she answered, amused at his consternation, if it were that.

"I wish I had known," he said, as if to himself.

"You know now. Isn't that soon enough? Are you afraid of the place, because people make a mystery of it?" she demanded impatiently.

"No. It isn't that." He looked across at the

valley again, and asked abruptly: "Is this the only way in?"

"No. There is another, but this is the quickest."

"Is the other as difficult as this?"

"In a way, yes. It is very much more roundabout. It isn't known much by the public. Not many outsiders have business in the valley."

She volunteered no explanation in detail, and the man beside her said, with a grim laugh:

"There isn't any general admission to the public this way, is there?"

"No. Oh, folks can come if they want to."

He looked full in her face, and said significantly: "I thought the way to Lost Valley was a sort of a secret—one that those who know are not expected to tell."

"Oh, that's just talk. Not many come in but our friends. We've had to be careful lately. But you can't call a secret what a thousand folks know."

It was like a blow in the face to him. Not many but their friends! And she was taking him in confidently because he was her friend. What sort of a friend was he? he asked himself. He could not perform the task to which he was pledged without striking home at her. If he succeeded in ferreting out the Squaw Creek raiders he must send to the penitentiary, perhaps to death, her neighbors, and possibly her relatives. She had told him her father was not implicated, but a daughter's faith in her parent was not convincing proof of his innocence.

If not her father, a brother might be involved. And she was innocently making it easy for him to meet on a friendly footing these hospitable, unsuspecting savages, who had shed human blood because of the unleashed passions in them!

In that moment, while he looked away toward Lost Valley, he sickened of the task that lay before him. What would she think of him if she knew?

Arlie, too, had been looking down the gulch toward the valley. Now her gaze came slowly round to him and caught the expression of his face.

"What's the matter?" she cried.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. An old heart pain that caught me suddenly."

"I'm sorry. We'll soon be home now. We'll travel slowly."

Her voice was tender with sympathy; so, too, were her eyes when he met them.

He looked away again and groaned in his heart.

CHAPTER IV

THE WARNING OF MANTRAP GULCH

They followed the trail down into the cañon. As the ponies slowly picked their footing on the steep narrow path, he asked:

"Why do they call it Mantrap Gulch?"

"It got its name before my time in the days when outlaws hid here. A hunted man came to Lost Cañon, a murderer wanted by the law for more crimes than one. He was well treated by the settlers. They gave him shelter and work. He was safe, and he knew it. But he tried to make his peace with the law outside by breaking the law of the valley. He knew that two men were lying hid in a pocket gulch, opening from the valley—men who were wanted for train robbery. He wrote to the company offering to betray these men if they would pay him the reward and see that he was not punished for his crimes.

"It seems he was suspected. His letter was opened, and the exits from the valley were both guarded. Knowing he was discovered, he tried to slip out by the river way. He failed, sneaked through the settlement at night, and slipped into

the cañon here. At this end of it he found armed men on guard. He ran back and found the entrance closed. He was in a trap. He tried to climb one of the walls. Do you see that point where the rock juts out?"

"About five hundred feet up? Yes."

"He managed to climb that high. Nobody ever knows how he did it, but when morning broke there he was, like a fly on a wall. His hunters came and saw him. I suppose he could hear them laughing as their voices came echoing up to him. They shot above him, below him, on either side of him. He knew they were playing with him, and that they would finish him when they got ready. He must have been half crazy with fear. Anyhow, he lost his hold and fell. He was dead before they reached him. From that day this has been called Mantrap Gulch."

The ranger looked up at the frowning walls which shut out the sunlight. His imagination pictured the drama—the hunted man's wild flight up the gulch; his dreadful discovery that it was closed; his desperate attempt to climb by moonlight the impossible cliff, and the tragedy that overtook him.

The girl spoke again softly, almost as if she were in the presence of that far-off Nemesis. "I suppose he deserved it. It's an awful thing to be a traitor; to sell the people who have befriended you. We can't put ourselves in his place and know why he

did it. All we can say is that we're glad—glad that we have never known men who do such things. Do you think people always felt a sort of shrinking when they were near him, or did he seem just like other men?"

Glancing at the man who rode beside her, she cried out at the stricken look on his face. "It's your heart again. You're worn out with anxiety and privations. I should have remembered and come slower," she reproached herself.

"I'm all right—now. It passes in a moment," he said hoarsely.

But she had already slipped from the saddle and was at his bridle rein. "No—no. You must get down. We have plenty of time. We'll rest here till you are better."

There was nothing for it but to obey. He dismounted, feeling himself a humbug and a scoundrel. He sat down on a mossy rock, his back against another, while she trailed the reins and joined him.

"You are better now, aren't you?" she asked, as she seated herself on an adjacent bowlder.

Gruffly he answered: "I'm all right."

She thought she understood. Men do not like to be coddled. She began to talk cheerfully of the first thing that came into her head. He made the necessary monosyllabic responses when her speech put it up to him, but she saw that his mind was brooding over something else. Once she saw his

gaze go up to the point on the cliff reached by the fugitive.

But it was not until they were again in the saddle that he spoke.

"Yes, he got what was coming to him. He had no right to complain."

"That's what my father says. I don't deny the justice of it, but whenever I think of it, I feel sorry for him."

"Why?"

Despite the quietness of the monosyllable, she divined an eager interest back of his question.

"He must have suffered so. He wasn't a brave man, they say. And he was one against many. They didn't hunt him. They just closed the trap and let him wear himself out trying to get through. Think of that awful week of hunger and exposure in the hills before the end!"

"It must have been pretty bad, especially if he wasn't a game man. But he had no legitimate kick coming. He took his chance and lost. It was up to him to pay."

"His name was David Burke. When he was a little boy I suppose his mother used to call him Davy. He wasn't bad then; just a little boy to be cuddled and petted. Perhaps he was married. Perhaps he had a sweetheart waiting for him outside, and praying for him. And they snuffed his life out as if he had been a rattlesnake."

"Because he was a miscreant and it was best he

shouldn't live. Yes, they did right. I would have helped do it in their place."

"My father did," she sighed.

They did not speak again until they had passed from between the chill walls to the warm sunshine of the valley beyond. Among the rocks above the trail, she glimpsed some early anemones blossoming bravely.

She drew up with a little cry of pleasure. "They're the first I have seen. I must have them."

Fraser swung from the saddle, but he was not quick enough. She reached them before he did, and after they had gathered them she insisted upon sitting down again.

He had his suspicions, and voiced them. "I believe you got me off just to make me sit down."

She laughed with deep delight. "I didn't, but since we are here we shall." And she ended debate by sitting down tailor-fashion, and beginning to arrange her little bouquet.

A meadow lark, troubadour of spring, trilled joyously somewhere in the pines above. The man looked up, then down at the vivid creature busy with her flowers at his feet. There was kinship between the two. She, too, was athrob with the joy note of spring.

"You're to sit down," she ordered, without looking up from the sheaf of anemone blossoms she was arranging.

He sank down beside her, aware vaguely of something new and poignant in his life.

CHAPTER V

JED BRISCOE TAKES A HAND

Suddenly a footfall, and a voice:

"Hello, Arlie! I been looking for you everywhere."

The Texan's gaze took in a slim dark man, good-looking after a fashion, but with dissipation written on the rather sullen face.

"Well, you've found me," the girl answered coolly.

"Yes, I've found you," the man answered, with a steady, watchful eye on the Texan.

Miss Dillon was embarrassed at this plain hostility, but indignation too sparkled in her eye. "Anything in particular you want?"

The newcomer ignored her question. His hard gaze challenged the Southerner; did more than challenge—weighed and condemned.

But this young woman was not used to being ignored. Her voice took on an edge of sharpness.

"What can I do for you, Jed?"

"Who's your friend?" the man demanded bluntly, insolently.

Arlie's flush showed the swift, upblazing resent-

ment she immediately controlled. "Mr. Fraser—just arrived from Texas. Mr. Fraser, let me introduce to you Mr. Briscoe."

The Texan stepped forward to offer his hand, but Briscoe deliberately put both of his behind him.

"Might I ask what Mr. Fraser, just arrived from Texas, is doing here?" the young man drawled, contriving to make an insult of every syllable.

The girl's eyes flashed dangerously. "He is here as my guest."

"Oh, as your guest!"

"Doesn't it please you, Jed?"

"Have I said it didn't please me?" he retorted smoothly.

"Your looks say it."

He let out a sudden furious oath. "Then my looks don't lie any."

Fraser was stepping forward, but with a gesture Arlie held him back. This was her battle, not his.

"What have you got to say about it?" she demanded.

"You had no right to bring him here. Who is he anyhow?"

"I think that is his business, and mine."

"I make it mine," he declared hotly. "I've heard about this fellow from your father. You met up with him on the trail. He *says* his name is Fraser. You don't even know whether that is true. He may be a spy. How do you know he ain't?"

"How do I know *you* aren't?" she countered swiftly.

"You've known me all my life. Did you ever see him before?"

"Never."

"Well, then!"

"He risked his life to save ours."

"Risked nothing! It was a trick, I tell you."

"It makes no difference to me what you tell me. Your opinion can't affect mine."

"You know the feeling of the valley just now about strangers," said Briscoe sullenly.

"It depends on who the stranger is."

"Well, I object to this one."

"So it seems; but I don't know any law that makes me do whatever you want me to." Her voice, low and clear, cut like a whiplash.

Beneath the dust of travel the young man's face burned with anger. "We're not discussing that just now. What I say is that you had no right to bring him here—not now, especially. You know why," he added, almost in a whisper.

"If you had waited and not attempted to browbeat me, I would have shown you that that is the very reason I had to bring him."

"How do you mean?"

"Never mind what I mean. You have insulted my friend, and through him, me. That is enough for one day." She turned from him haughtily

and spoke to the Texan. "If you are ready, Mr. Fraser, we'll be going now."

The ranger, whose fingers had been itching to get at the throat of this insolent young man, turned without a word and obediently brought the girl's pony, then helped her to mount. Briscoe glared, in a silent tempest of passion.

"I think I have left a glove and my anemones where we were sitting," the girl said sweetly to the Texan.

Fraser found them, tightened the saddle girth, and mounted Teddy. As they cantered away, Arlie called to him to look at the sunset behind the mountains.

From the moment of her dismissal of Briscoe the girl had apparently put him out of her thoughts. No fine lady of the courts could have done it with more disdainful ease. And the Texan, following her lead, played his part in the little comedy, ignoring the other man as completely as she did.

The young cattleman, furious, his teeth set in impotent rage, watched it all with the lust to kill in his heart. When they had gone, he flung himself into the saddle and rode away in a tumultuous fury.

Before they had covered two hundred yards Arlie turned to her companion, all contrition. "There! I've done it again. My fits of passion are always getting me into trouble. This time one

of them has given you an enemy, and a bad one, too."

"No. He would have been my enemy no matter what you said. Soon as he put his eyes on me, I knew it."

"Because I brought you here, you mean?"

"I don't mean only that. Some folks are born to be enemies, just as some are born to be friends. They've only got to look in each other's eyes once to know it."

"That's strange. I never heard anybody else say that. Do you really mean it?"

"Yes."

"And did you ever have such an enemy before? Don't answer me if I oughtn't to ask that," she added quickly.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In Texas. Why, here we are at a ranch!"

"Yes. It's ours, and yours as long as you want to stay. Did you feel that you were enemies the moment you saw this man in Texas?"

"I knew we were going to have trouble as soon as we looked at each other. I had no feeling toward him, but he had toward me."

"And did you have trouble?"

"Some, before I landed him. The way it turned out he had most of it."

She glanced quickly at him. "What do you mean by 'landed'?"

"I am an officer in the Texas Rangers."

"What are they? Something like our forest rangers?"

"No. The duty of a Texas Ranger is to enforce the law against desperadoes. We prevent crime if we can. When we can't do that, we hunt down the criminals."

Arlie looked at him in a startled silence.

"You are an officer of the law—a sort of sheriff?" she said, at last.

"Yes, in Texas. This is Wyoming." He made his distinction, knowing it was a false one. Somehow he had the feeling of a whipped cur.

"I wish I had known. If you had only told me earlier," she said, so low as to be almost a whisper.

"I'm sorry. If you like, I'll go away again," he offered.

"No, no. I'm only thinking that it gives Jed a hold, gives him something to stir up his friends with, you know. That is, it would if he knew. He mustn't find out."

"Be frank. Don't make any secret of it. That's the best way," he advised.

She shook her head. "You don't know Jed's crowd. They'd be suspicious of any officer, no matter where he came from."

"Far as I can make out, that young man is going to be loaded with suspicions of me anyhow," he laughed.

"It isn't anything to laugh at. You don't know him," she told him gravely.

"And can't say I'm suffering to," he drawled.

She looked at him a little impatiently, as if he were a child playing with gunpowder and unaware of its potentialities.

"Can't you understand? You're not in Texas with your friends all around you. This is Lost Valley—and Lost Valley isn't on the map. Men make their own law here. That is, some of them do. I wouldn't give a snap of my fingers for your life if the impression spread that you are a spy. It doesn't matter that I know you're not. Others must feel it, too."

"I see. And Mr. Briscoe will be a molder of public opinion?"

"So far as he can he will. We must forestall him."

"Beat him to it, and give me a clean bill of moral health, eh?"

She frowned. "This is serious business, my friend."

"I'm taking it that way," he said smilingly.

"I shouldn't have guessed it."

Yet for all his debonair ease the man had an air of quiet competence. His strong, bronzed face and neck, the set of his shoulders, the light poise of him in the saddle, the steady confidence of the gray eyes, all told her as much. She was aware of a

curiosity about what was hidden behind that stone-wall face of his.

"You didn't finish telling me about that enemy in Texas," she suggested suddenly.

"Oh, there ain't much to tell. He broke out from the pen, where I had put him when I was a kid. He was a desperado wanted by the authorities, so I arrested him again."

"Sounds easy."

"He made some trouble, shot up two or three men first." Fraser lifted his hand absently.

"Is that scar on your hand where he shot you?" Arlie asked.

He looked up in quick surprise. "Now, how did you know that?"

"You were talking of the trouble he made and you looked at your hand," she explained. "Where is he now? In the penitentiary?"

"No. He broke away before I got him there."

She had another flash of inspiration. "And you came to Wyoming to get him again."

"Good gracious, ma'am, but you're ce'tainly a wizard! That's why I came, though it's a secret."

"What is he wanted for?"

"Robbing a train, three murders and a few other things."

As she swung from her pony in front of the old-fashioned Southern log house, Arlie laughed at him over her shoulder.

"You're a fine officer! Tell all you know to the first girl you meet!"

"Well, you see, the girl happened to be—you!"

After the manner of the old-fashioned Southern house a wide "gallery" bisected it from porch to rear. Saddles hung from pegs in the gallery. Horse blankets and bridles, spurs and saddlebags, lay here and there in disarray. A disjointed rifle which some one had started to clean was on the porch. Swiftly Arlie stripped saddle, bridle, and blanket from her pony and flung them down as a contribution to the general disorder, and at her suggestion Fraser did the same. A half-grown lad came running to herd the horses into a corral close at hand.

"I want you when you've finished feeding, Bobbie," Arlie told the lad. Then briefly to her guest: "This way, please."

She led him into a large, cheerful living room, into which, through big casement windows, the light streamed. It was a pleasant room, despite its barbaric touch. There was a grizzly bear skin before the great open, stone fireplace, and Navajo rugs covered the floor and hung on the walls. The skin of a silver-tip bear was stretched beneath a writing desk, a trophy of Arlie's rifle, which hung in a rack above. Civilization had furnished its quota to the room in a piano, some books, and a few photographs.

The Texan observed that order reigned here,

even though it did not interfere with the large effect of comfort.

The girl left him, to return presently with her aunt, to whom she introduced him. Miss Ruth Dillon was a little, bright-eyed old lady, whose hair was still black, and her step light. Evidently she had her instructions, for she greeted their guest with charming cordiality, and thanked him for the service he had rendered her brother and her niece.

Presently the boy Bobbie arrived for further orders. Arlie went to her desk and wrote hurriedly.

"You're to give this note to my father," she directed. "Be sure he gets it himself. You ought to find him down in Jackson's Pocket, if the drive is from Round Top to-day. But you can ask about that along the road."

When the boy had gone, Arlie turned to Fraser.

"I want to tell father you're here before Jed gets to him with his story," she explained. "I've asked him to ride down right away. He'll probably come in a few hours and spend the night here."

After they had eaten supper they returned to the living room, where a great fire, built by Jim the negro horse wrangler, was roaring up the chimney.

It was almost eleven o'clock when horses galloped up and Dillon came into the house, followed by Jed Briscoe. The latter looked triumphant, the former embarrassed as he disgorged letters and newspapers from his pocket.

"I stopped at the office to get the mail as I came down. Here's yore paper, Ruth."

Miss Dillon pounced eagerly upon the Gimlet Butte *Avalanche,* and disappeared with it to her bedroom. She had formerly lived in Gimlet Butte, and was still keenly interested in the gossip of the town.

Briscoe had scored one against Arlie by meeting her father, telling his side of the story, and returning with him to the house. Nevertheless Arlie, after giving him the slightest nod her duty as hostess would permit, made her frontal attack without hesitation.

"You'll be glad to know, dad, that Mr. Fraser is our guest. He has had rather a stormy time since we saw him last, and he has consented to stay with us a few days till things blow over."

Dillon, very ill at ease, shook hands with the Texan, and was understood to say that he was glad to see him.

"Then you don't look it, dad," Arlie told him, with a gleam of vexed laughter.

Her father turned reproachfully upon her. "Now, honey, yo' done wrong to say that. Yo' know Mr. Fraser is welcome to stay in my house long as he wants. I'm proud to have him stay. Do you think I forgot already what he done for us?"

"Of course not. Then it's all settled," Arlie cut

in, and rushed on to another subject. "How's the round-up coming, dad?"

"We'll talk about the round-up later. What I'm saying is that Mr. Fraser has only got to say the word, and I'm there to he'p him till the cows come home."

"That's just what I told him, dad."

"Hold yore hawsses, will yo', honey? But, notwithstanding which, and not backing water on that proposition none, we come to another p'int."

"Which Jed made to you carefully on the way down," his daughter interrupted scornfully.

"It don't matter who made it. The p'int is that there are reasons why strangers ain't exactly welcome in this valley right now, Mr. Fraser. This country is full o' suspicion. Whilst it's onjust, charges are being made against us on the outside. Right now the settlers here have got to guard against furriners. Now I know yo're all right, Mr. Fraser. But my neighbors don't know it."

"It was our lives he saved, not our neighbors'," scoffed Arlie.

"K'rect. So I say, Mr. Fraser, if yo' are out o' funds, I'll finance you. Wherever you want to go I'll see you git there, but I hain't got the right to invite you to stay in Lost Valley."

"Better send him to Gimlet Butte, dad! He killed a man in helping us to escape, and he's wanted bad! He broke jail to get here! Pay his expenses back

to the Butte! Then if there's a reward, you and Jed can divide it!" his daughter jeered.

"What's that? Killed a man, yo' say?"

"Yes. To save us. Shall we send him back under a rifle guard? Or shall we have Sheriff Brandt come and get him?"

"Gracious goodness, gyurl, shet up whilst I think. Killed a man, eh? This valley has always been open to fugitives. Ain't that right, Jed?"

"To fugitives, yes," said Jed significantly. "But that fact ain't proved."

"Jed's getting right important. We'll soon be asking him whether *we* can stay here," said Arlie, with a scornful laugh. "And I say it is proved. We met the deputies the yon side of the big cañon."

Briscoe looked at her out of dogged, half-shuttered eyes. He said nothing, but he looked the picture of malice.

Dillon rasped his stubbly chin and looked at the Texan. Far from an alert-minded man, he came to conclusions slowly. Now he arrived at one.

"Dad burn it, we'll take the 'fugitive' for granted. Yo' kin lie up here long as yo' like, friend. I'll guarantee yo' to my neighbors. I reckon if they don't like it they kin lump it. I ain't a-going to give up the man that saved my gyurl's life."

The door opened and let in Miss Ruth Dillon. The little old lady had the newspaper in her hand, and her beady eyes were shining with excitement.

"It's all in here, Mr. Fraser—about your capture

and escape. But you didn't tell us all of it. Perhaps you didn't know, though, that they had plans to storm the jail and hang you?"

"Yes, I knew that," the Texan answered coolly. "The jailer told me what was coming to me. I decided not to wait and see whether he was lying. I wrenched a bar from the window, lowered myself by my bedding, flew the coop, and borrowed a horse. That's the whole story, ma'am, except that Miss Arlie brought me here to hide me."

"Read aloud what the paper says," Dillon ordered.

His sister handed the *Avalanche* to her niece. Arlie found the article and began to read:

"A dastardly outrage occurred three miles from Gimlet Butte last night. While on their way home from the trial of the well-known Three Pines sheep raid case, a small party of citizens were attacked by miscreants presumed to be from the Cedar Mountain country. How many of these there were we have no means of knowing, as the culprits disappeared in the mountains after murdering William Faulkner, a well-known sheep man, and wounding Tom Long."

There followed a lurid account of the battle, written from the point of view of the other side. After which the editor paid his respects to Fraser, though not by name.

"One of the ruffians, for some unknown reason—perhaps in the hope of getting a chance to slay another victim—remained too long near the scene of the atroc-

ity and was apprehended early this morning by that fearless deputy, James Schilling. He refused to give his name or any other information about himself. While the man is a stranger to Gimlet Butte, there can be no doubt that he is one of the Lost Valley desperadoes implicated in the Squaw Creek raid some months ago. Since the bullet that killed Faulkner was probably fired from the rifle carried by this man, it is safe to assume that the actual murderer was apprehended. The man is above medium height, well built and muscular, and carries all the earmarks of a desperate character."

Arlie glanced up from her reading to smile at Fraser. "Dad and I are miscreants, and you are a ruffian and a desperate character," she told him gayly.

"Go on, honey," her father urged.

The account told how the prisoner had been confined in the jail, and how the citizens, wrought up by the continued lawlessness of the Lost Valley district, had quietly gathered to make an example of the captured man. While condemning lynching in general, the *Avalanche* wanted to go on record as saying that if ever it was justifiable this was the occasion. Unfortunately, the prisoner, giving thus further evidence of his desperate nature, had cut his way out of prison with a pocketknife and escaped from town by means of a horse he found saddled and did not hesitate to steal. At the time of going to press he had not yet been recaptured,

though Sheriff Brandt had several posses on his trail. The outlaw had cut the telephone wires, but it was confidently believed he would be captured before he reached his friends in the mountains.

Arlie's eyes were shining. She looked at Briscoe and handed him the paper triumphantly. This was her vindication for bringing the hunted man to Lost Valley. He had been fighting their battles and had almost lost his life in doing it. Jed might say what he liked while she had this to refute him.

"I guess that editor doesn't believe so confidently as he pretends," she said. "Anyhow, he has guessed wrong. Mr. Fraser has reached his friends, and they'll look out for him."

Her father came to her support radiantly. "You bet yore boots they will, honey. Shake hands on it, Mr. Fraser. I reckon yore satisfied too, Jed. Eh, boy?"

Briscoe viewed the scene with cynical malice. "Quite a hero, ain't he? If you want to know, I stand pat. Mr. Fraser from Texas don't draw the wool over my eyes none. Right now I serve notice to that effect. Meantime, since I don't aim to join the happy circle of his admirers, I reckon I'll duck."

He nodded impudently at Arlie, turned on his heel, and went trailing off with jingling spur. They heard him cursing at his horse as he mounted. The cruel swish of a quirt came to them, after which the swift pounding of a horse's hoofs. The cow pony had found its gallop in a stride.

The Texan laughed lightly. "Exit Mr. Briscoe, some disappointed," he murmured.

He noticed that none of the others shared his mirth.

CHAPTER VI

A SURE ENOUGH WOLF

Briscoe did not return at once to the scene of the round-up. He followed the trail toward Jackson's Pocket, but diverged after he had gone a few miles and turned into one of the hundred blind gulches that ran out from the valley to the impassable mountain wall behind. It was known as Jack Rabbit Run, because its labyrinthine trails offered a retreat into which hunted men might always dive for safety. Nobody knew its recesses better than Jed Briscoe, who was acknowledged to be the leader of that faction in the valley which had brought it the bad name it held.

Long before Jed's time there had been such a faction, then the dominant one of the place, now steadily losing ground as civilization seeped in, but still strong because bound by ties of kindred and of interest to the honest law-abiding majority. Of it were the outlaws who came periodically to find shelter here, the hasty men who had struck in heat and found it necessary to get beyond the law's reach for a time, and reckless cowpunchers, who foregathered with these, because they were birds

of a feather. To all such, Jack Rabbit Run was a haven of rest.

By devious paths the cattleman guided his horse until he came to a kind of pouch, guarded by a thick growth of aspens. The front of these he skirted, plunged into them at the farther edge, and followed a narrow trail which wound among them till the grove opened upon a saucer-shaped valley in which nestled a little log cabin. Lights gleamed from the windows hospitably and suggested the comfortable warmth of a log fire and good-fellowship. So many a hunted man had thought as he emerged from that grove to look down upon the valley nestling at his feet.

Jed turned his horse into a corral back of the house, let out the hoot of an owl as he fed and watered, and returning to the cabin, gave the four knocks that were the signal for admission.

Bolts were promptly withdrawn and the door thrown open by a slender, fair-haired fellow, whose features looked as if they had been roughed out and not finished. He grinned amiably at the newcomer and greeted him with: "Hello, Jed."

"Hello, Tommie," returned Briscoe, carelessly, and let his glance pass to the three men seated at the table with cards and poker chips in front of them.

The man facing Briscoe was a big, heavy-set, unmistakable ruffian with long, drooping, red mustache, and villainous, fishy eyes. It was observable that the trigger finger of his right hand was miss-

ing. Also, there was a nasty scar on his right cheek running from the bridge of the nose halfway to the ear. This gave surplusage to the sinister appearance he already had. To him Briscoe spoke first, attempting a geniality he did not feel.

"How're they coming, Texas?"

"You ain't heard me kicking any, have you?" the man made sullen answer.

"Not out loud," said Briscoe significantly, his eyes narrowing after a trick they had when he was most on his guard.

"I reckon my remarks will be plumb audible when I've got any kick to register, seh."

"I hope not, Mr. Johnson. In this neck of woods a man is liable to get himself disliked if he shoots off his mouth too prevalent. Folks that don't like our ways can usually find a door open out of Lost Valley—*if they don't wait too long!*"

"I'm some haidstrong. I reckon I'll stay." He scowled at Jed with disfavor, meeting him eye to eye. But presently the rigor of his gaze relaxed. He remembered that he was a fugitive from justice, and at the mercy of this man who had so far guessed his secret. Putting a temporary curb on his bilious jealousy, he sulkily added: "Leastways, if there's no objection, Mr. Briscoe. I ain't looking for trouble with anybody."

"A man who's looking for it usually finds it, Mr. Johnson. A man that ain't, lives longer and more peaceable." At this point Jed pulled himself to-

gether and bottled his arrogance, remembering that he had come to make an alliance with this man. "But that's no way for friends to talk. I got a piece of news for you. We'll talk it over in the other room and not disturb these gentlemen."

One of the "gentlemen" grinned. He was a round-bodied, bullet-headed cowpuncher, with a face like burnt leather. He was in chaps, flannel shirt, and broad-brimmed hat. From a pocket in his chaps a revolver protruded. "That's right, Jed. Wrap it up proper. You'd hate to disturb us, wouldn't you?"

"I'll not interrupt you from losing your money more than five minutes, Yorky," answered Briscoe promptly.

The third man at the table laughed suddenly. "Ay bane laik to know how yuh feel now, Yorky?" he taunted.

"It ain't you that's taking my spondulix in, you big, overgrown Swede!" returned Yorky amiably. "It's the gent from Texas. How can a fellow buck against luck that fills from a pair to a full house on the draw?"

The blond giant, Siegfried—who was not a Swede, but a Norwegian—announced that he was seventeen dollars in the game himself.

Tommie, already broke, and an onlooker, reported sadly:

"Sixty-one for me, durn it!"

Jed picked up a lamp, led the way to the other room, and closed the door behind them.

"I thought it might interest you to know that there's a new arrival in the valley, Mr. Struve," he said smoothly.

"Who says my name's Struve?" demanded the man who called himself Johnson, with fierce suspicion.

Briscoe laughed softly. "I say it—Wolf Struve. Up till last month your address for two years has been number nine thousand four hundred and thirty-two, care of Penitentiary Warden, Yuma, Arizona."

"Prove it. Prove it," blustered the accused man.

"Sure." From his inside coat pocket Jed took out a printed notice offering a reward for the capture of Nick Struve, alias "Wolf" Struve, convict, who had broken prison on the night of February seventh, and escaped, after murdering one of the guards. A description and a photograph of the man wanted was appended.

"Looks some like you. Don't it, Mr.—shall I say Johnson or Struve?"

"Say *Johnson!*" roared the Texan. "That ain't me. I'm no jailbird."

"Glad to know it." Briscoe laughed in suave triumph. "I thought you might be. This description sounds some familiar. I'll not read it all. But listen: 'Scar on right cheek, running from bridge

of nose toward ear. Trigger finger missing; shot away when last arrested. Weight, about one hundred and ninety.' By the way, just out of curiosity, how heavy *are* you, Mr. Johnson? 'Height, five feet nine inches. Protuberant, fishy eyes. Long, drooping, reddish mustache.' I'd shave that mustache if I were you, Mr.—er—Johnson. Some one might mistake you for Nick Struve."

The man who called himself Johnson recognized denial as futile. He flung up the sponge with a blasphemous oath. "What do you want? What's your game? Do you want to sell me for the reward? By thunder, you'd better not!"

Briscoe gave way to one of the swift bursts of passion to which he was subject. "Don't threaten me, you prison scum! Don't come here and try to dictate what I'm to do, and what I'm not to do. I'll sell you if I want to. I'll send you back to be hanged like a dog. Say the word, and I'll have you dragged out of here inside of forty-eight hours."

Struve reached for his gun, but the other, wary as a panther, had him covered while the convict's revolver was still in his pocket.

"Reach for the roof! Quick—or I'll drill a hole in you! That's the idea. I reckon I'll collect your hardware while I'm at it. That's a heap better."

Struve glared at him, speechless.

"You're too slow on the draw for this part of the country, my friend," jeered Briscoe. "Or perhaps, while you were at Yuma, you got out of prac-

tice. It's like stealing candy from a kid to beat you to it. Don't ever try to draw a gun again in Lost Valley while you're asleep. You might never waken."

Jed was in high good humor with himself. His victim looked silent murder at him.

"One more thing, while you're in a teachable frame of mind," continued Briscoe. "*I* run Lost Valley. What I say, goes here. Get that soaked into your think-tank, my friend. Ever since you came, you've been disputing that in your mind. You've been stirring up the boys against me. Think I haven't noticed it? Guess again, Mr. Struve. You'd like to be boss yourself, wouldn't you? Forget it. Down in Texas you may be a bad, bad man, a sure enough wolf, but in Wyoming you only stack up to coyote size. Let this slip your mind, *and I'll be running Lost Valley after your bones are picked white by the buzzards.*"

"I ain't a-goin' to make you any trouble. Didn't I tell you that before?" growled Struve reluctantly.

"See you don't, then. Now I'll come again to my news. I was telling you that there's another stranger in this valley, Mr. Struve. Hails from Texas, too. Name of Fraser. Ever hear of him?"

Briscoe was hardly prepared for the change which came over the Texan at mention of that name. The prominent eyes stared, and a deep, apoplectic flush ran over the scarred face. The hand that caught at the wall trembled with excitement.

"You mean Steve Fraser—Fraser of the Rangers!" he gasped.

"That's what I'm not sure of. I got to milling it over after I left him, and it come to me I'd seen him or his picture before. You still got that magazine with the article about him?"

"Yes."

"I looked it over hurriedly. Let me see his picture again, and I'll tell you if it's the same man."

"It's in the other room."

"Get it."

Struve presently returned with the magazine, and, opening it, pointed to a photograph of a young officer in uniform, with the caption underneath:

LIEUTENANT STEPHEN FRASER OF THE TEXAS RANGERS
Who, single-handed, ran down and brought to justice the worst gang of outlaws known in recent years.

"It's the same man," Briscoe announced.

The escaped convict's mouth set in a cruel line.

"One of us, either him or me, never leaves this valley alive," he announced.

Jed laughed softly and handed back the revolver. "That's the way to talk. My friend, if you mean that, you'll need your gun. Here's hoping you beat him to it."

"It won't be an even break this time if I can help it."

"I gather that it *was*, last time."

"Yep. We drew together." Struve interlarded

his explanation with oaths. "He's a devil with a gun. See that?" He held up his right hand.

"I see you're shy your most useful finger, if that's what you mean."

"Fraser took it off clean at twenty yards. I got him in the hand, too, but right or left he's a dead shot. He might 'a' killed me if he hadn't wanted to take me alive. Before I'm through with him he'll wish he had."

"Well, you don't want to make any mistake next time. Get him right."

"I sure will." Hitherto Struve had been absorbed in his own turbid emotions, but he came back from them now with a new-born suspicion in his eyes. "Where do you come in, Mr. Briscoe? Why are you so plumb anxious I should load him up with lead? If it's a showdown, I'd some like to see your cards too."

Jed shrugged. "My reasons ain't urgent like yours. I don't favor spies poking their noses in here. That's all there's to it."

Jed had worked out a plot as he rode through the night from the Dillon ranch—one so safe and certain that it pointed to sure success. Jed was no coward, but he had a spider-like cunning that wove others as dupes into the web of his plans.

The only weakness in his position lay in himself, in that sudden boiling up of passion in him that was likely to tear through his own web and destroy it. Three months ago he had given way

to one of these outbursts, and he knew that any one of four or five men could put a noose around his neck. That was another reason why such a man as this Texas ranger must not be allowed to meet and mix with them.

It was his cue to know as much as he could of every man that came into the valley. Wherefore he had run down the record of Struve from the reward placard which a detective agency furnished him of hundreds of criminals who were wanted. What could be more simple than to stir up the convict, in order to save himself, to destroy the ranger who had run him down before? There would be a demand so insistent for the punishment of the murderer that it could not be ignored. He would find some pretext to lure Struve from the valley for a day or two, and would arrange it so that he would be arrested while he was away. Thus he would be rid of both these troublesome intruders without making a move that could be seen.

It was all as simple as A B C. Already Struve had walked into the trap. As Jed sat down to take a hand in the poker game that was in progress, he chuckled quietly to himself. He was quite sure that he was already practically master of the situation.

CHAPTER VII

THE ROUND-UP

"Would you like to take in the round-up to-day?"

Arlie flung the question at Fraser with a frank directness of sloe-black eyes that had never known coquetry. She was washing handkerchiefs, and her sleeves were rolled to the elbows of the slender, but muscular, coffee-brown arms.

"I would."

"If you like you may ride out with me to Willow Spring. I have some letters to take to dad."

"Suits me down to the ground, ma'am."

It was a morning beautiful even for Wyoming. The spring called potently to the youth in them. The fine untempered air was like wine, and out of a blue sky the sun beat pleasantly down through a crystal-clear atmosphere known only to the region of the Rockies. Nature was preaching a wordless sermon on the duty of happiness to two buoyant hearts that scarce needed it.

Long before they reached the scene of the round-up they could hear the almost continual bawl of worried cattle, and could even see the cloud of dust

they stirred. They passed the remuda, in charge of two lads lounging sleepily in their saddles with only an occasional glance at the bunch of grazing horses they were watching. Presently they looked down from a high ridge at the busy scene below.

Out of Lost Valley ran a hundred rough and wooded gulches to the impassable cliff wall which bounded it. Into one of these they now descended slowly, letting their ponies pick a way among the loose stones and shale which covered the steep hillside.

What their eyes fell upon was cattle-land at its busiest. Several hundred wild hill cattle were gathered in the green draw, and around them was a cordon of riders holding the gather steady. Now and again one of the cows would make a dash to escape, and instantly the nearest rider would wheel, as on a batter's plate, give chase, and herd the animal back after a more or less lengthy pursuit.

Several of the riders were cutting out from the main herd cows with unmarked calves, which last were immediately roped and thrown. Usually it took only an instant to determine with whose cow the calf had been, and a few seconds to drive home the correct brand upon the sizzling flank. Occasionally the discussion was more protracted, in order to solve a doubt as to the ownership, and once a calf was released that it might again seek its mother to prove identity.

Arlie observed that Fraser's eyes were shining.

"I used to be a puncher myse'f," he explained. "I tell you it feels good to grip a saddle between your knees, and to swallow the dust and hear the bellow of the cows. I used to live in them days. I sure did."

A boyish puncher galloped past with a whoop and waved his hat to Arlie. For two weeks he had been in the saddle for fourteen hours out of the twenty-four. He was grimy with dust, and hollow-eyed from want of sleep. A stubbly beard covered his brick-baked face. But the unquenchable gayety of the youthful West could not be extinguished. Though his flannel shirt gaped where the thorns had torn it, and the polka-dot bandanna round his throat was discolored with sweat, he was as blithely debonair as ever.

"That's Dick France. He's a great friend of mine," Arlie explained.

"Dick's in luck," Fraser commented, but whether because he was enjoying himself so thoroughly or because he was her friend the ranger did not explain.

They stayed through the day, and ate dinner at the tail of the chuck wagon with the cattlemen. The light of the camp fires, already blazing in the nipping night air, shone brightly. The ranger rode back with her to the ranch, but next morning he asked Arlie if she could lend him an old pair of chaps discarded by her father.

She found a pair for him.

"If you don't mind, I'll ride out to the round-up and stay with the boys a few days," he suggested.

"You're going to ride with them," she accused.

"I thought I would. I'm not going to saddle myse'f on you two ladies forever."

"You know we're glad to have you. But that isn't it. What about your heart? You know you can't ride the range."

He flushed, and knew again that feeling of contempt for himself, or, to be more exact, for his position.

"I'll be awful careful, Miss Arlie," was all he found to say.

She could not urge him further, lest he misunderstand her.

"Of course, you know best," she said, with a touch of coldness.

He saddled Teddy and rode back. The drive for the day was already on, but he fell in beside young France and did his part. Before two days had passed he was accepted as one of these hard-riding punchers, for he was a competent vaquero and stood the grueling work as one born to it. He was, moreover, well liked, both because he could tell a good story and because these sons of Anak recognized in him that dynamic quality of manhood they could not choose but respect. In this a fortunate accident aided him.

They were working Lost Creek, a deep and rapid stream at the point where the drive ended. The

big Norwegian, Siegfried, trying to head off a wild cow racing along the bank with tail up, got too near the edge. The bank caved beneath the feet of his pony, and man and horse went head first into the turbid waters. Fraser galloped up at once, flung himself from his saddle, and took in at a glance the fact that the big blond Hercules could not swim.

The Texan dived for him as he was going down, got hold of him by the hair, and after a struggle managed somehow to reach the farther shore. As they both lay there, one exhausted, and the other fighting for the breath he had nearly lost forever, Dillon reached the bank.

"Is it all right, Steve?" he called anxiously.

"All right," grinned the ranger weakly. "He'll go on many a spree yet. Eh, Siegfried?"

The Norwegian nodded. He was still frightened and half drowned. It was not till they were riding up the creek to find a shallow place they could ford that he spoke his mind.

"Ay bane all in ven you got me, pardner."

"Oh, you were still kicking."

"Ay bane t'ink Ay had von chance not to get out. But Ay bane not forget dees. Eef you ever get in a tight place, send vor Sig Siegfried."

"That's all right, Sig."

Nobody wasted any compliments on him. After the fashion of their kind, they guyed the Norwegian about the bath he had taken. Nevertheless, Fraser

knew that he had won the liking of these men, as well as their deep respect. They began to call him by his first name, which hitherto only Dillon had done, and they included him in the rough, practical jokes they played on each other.

One night they initiated him—an experience to be both dreaded and desired. To be desired because it implies the conferring of the thirty-second degree of the freemasonry of Cattleland's approval; to be dreaded because hazing is mild compared with some features of the exercises.

Fraser was dragged from sweet slumber, pegged face down on his blankets, with a large-sized man at the extremity of each arm and leg, and introduced to a chapping. Dick France wielded the chaps vigorously upon the portions of his anatomy where they would do the most execution. The Texan did not enjoy it, but he refrained from saying so. When he was freed, he sat down painfully on a saddle and remarked amiably:

"You're a beautiful bunch, ain't you? Anybody got any smoking?"

This proper acceptance of their attentions so delighted these overgrown children that they dug up three bottles of whisky that were kept in camp for rattlesnake bites, and made Rome howl. They had ridden all day, and for many weary days before that; but they were started toward making a night of it when Dillon appeared.

Dillon was boss of the round-up—he had been

elected by general consent, and his word was law. He looked round upon them with a twinkling eye, and wanted to know how long it was going to last. But the way he put his question was:

"How much whisky is there left?"

Finding there was none, he ordered them all back to their blankets. After a little skylarking, they obeyed. Next day Fraser rode the hills, a sore, sore man. But nobody who did not know could have guessed it. He would have died before admitting it to any of his companions. Thus he won the accolade of his peers as a worthy horseman of the hills.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BRONCHO BUSTERS

Jed Briscoe rejoined the round-up the day following Fraser's initiation. He took silent note of the Texan's popularity, of how the boys all called him "Steve" because he had become one of them, and were ready either to lark with him or work with him. He noticed, too, that the ranger did his share of work without a whimper, apparently enjoying the long, hard hours in the saddle. The hill riding was of the roughest, and the cattle were wild as deers and as agile. But there was no break-neck incline too steep for Steve Fraser to follow.

Once Jed chanced upon Steve stripped for a bath beside the creek, and he understood the physical reason for his perfect poise. The wiry, sinuous muscles, packed compactly without obtrusion, played beneath the skin like those of a panther. He walked as softly and as easily as one, with something of the rippling, unconscious grace of that jungle lord. It was this certainty of himself that vivified the steel-gray eyes which looked forth unafraid, and yet amiably, upon a world primitive

enough to demand proof of every man who would hold the respect of his fellows.

Meanwhile, Briscoe waited for Struve and his enemy to become entangled in the net he was spinning. He made no pretense of fellowship with Fraser; nor, on the other hand, did he actively set himself against him with the men. He was ready enough to sneer when Dick France grew enthusiastic about his new friend, but this was to be expected from one of his jaundiced temper.

"Who is this all-round crackerjack you're touting, Dick?" he asked significantly.

France was puzzled. "Who is he? Why, he's Steve Fraser."

"I ain't asking you what his name is. I'm asking *who* he is. What does he do for a living? Who recommended him so strong to the boys that they take up with him so sudden?"

"I don't care what he does for a living. Likely, he rides the range in Texas. When it comes to recommendations, he's got one mighty good one written on his face."

"You think so, do you?"

"That's what I think, Jed. He's the goods—best of company, a straight-up rider, and a first-rate puncher. Ask any of the boys."

"I'm using my eyes, Dick. They tell me all I need to know."

"Well, use them to-morrow. He's going to take a whirl at riding Dead Easy. Next day he's going

to take on Rocking Horse. If he makes good on them, you'll admit he can ride."

"I ain't saying he can't ride. So can you. If it's plumb gentle, I can make out to stick on a pony myself."

"Course you can ride. Everybody knows that. You're the best ever. Any man that can win the championship of Wyoming—— But you'll say yourself them strawberry roans are wicked devils."

"He hasn't ridden them yet, Dick."

"He's going to."

"We'll be there to see it. Mebbe he will. Mebbe he won't. I've known men before who thought they were going to."

It was in no moment of good-natured weakness that Fraser had consented to try riding the outlaw horses. Nor had his vanity anything to do with it. He knew a time might be coming when he would need all the prestige and all the friendship he could earn to tide him over the crisis. Jed Briscoe had won his leadership, partly because he could shoot quicker and straighter, ride harder, throw a rope more accurately, and play poker better than his companions.

Steve had a mind to show that he, too, could do some of these things passing well. Wherefore, he had let himself be badgered good-naturedly into trying a fall with these famous buckers. As the heavy work of the round-up was almost over, Dillon

was glad to relax discipline enough to give the boys a little fun.

The remuda was driven up while the outfit was at breakfast. His friends guyed Steve with pleasant prophecy.

"He'll be hunting leather about the fourth buck!"

"If he ain't trying to make of himse'f one of them there Darius Green machines!" suggested another.

"Got any last words, Steve? Dead Easy most generally eats 'em alive," Dick derided.

"Sho! Cayn't you see he's so plumb scared he cayn't talk?"

Fraser grinned and continued to eat. When he had finished he got his lariat from the saddle, swung to Siegfried's pony, and rode unobtrusively forward to the remuda. The horses were circling round and round, so that it was several minutes before he found a chance. When he did, the rope snaked forward and dropped over the head of the strawberry roan. The horse stood trembling, making not the least resistance, even while the ranger saddled and cinched.

But before the man settled to the saddle, the outlaw was off on its furious resistance. It went forward and up into the air with a plunging leap. The rider swung his hat and gave a joyous whoop. Next instant there was a scatter of laughing men as the horse came toward them in a series of short,

stiff-legged bucks which would have jarred its rider like a pile driver falling on his head had he not let himself grow limp to meet the shock.

All the tricks of its kind this unbroken five-year-old knew. Weaving, pitching, sunfishing, it fought superbly, the while Steve rode with the consummate ease of a master. His sinuous form swayed instinctively to every changing motion of his mount. Even when it flung itself back in blind fury, he dropped lightly from the saddle and into it again as the animal struggled to its feet.

The cook waved a frying pan in frantic glee. "Hurra-ay! You're the goods, all right, all right."

"You bet. Watch Steve fan him. And he ain't pulled leather yet. Not once."

An unseen spectator was taking it in from the brow of a little hill crowned with a group of firs. She had reached this point just as the Texan had swung to the saddle, and she watched the battle between horse and man intently. If any had been there to see, he might have observed a strange fire smouldering in her eyes. For the first time there was filtering through her a vague suspicion of this man who claimed to have heart trouble, and had deliberately subjected himself to the terrific strain of such a test. She had seen broncho busters get off bleeding at mouth and nose and ears after a hard fight, and she had never seen a contest more superbly fought than this one. But full

of courage as the horse was, it had met its master and began to know it.

The ranger's quirt was going up and down, stinging Dead Easy to more violent exertions, if possible. But the outlaw had shot its bolt. The plunges grew less vicious, the bucks more feeble. It still pitched, because of the unbroken gameness that defied defeat, but so mechanically that the motions could be forecasted.

Then Steve began to soothe the brute. Somehow the wild creature became aware that this man who was his master was also disposed to be friendly. Presently it gave up the battle, quivering in every limb. Fraser slipped from the saddle, and putting his arm across its neck began to gentle the outlaw. The animal had always looked the incarnation of wickedness. The red eyes in its ill-shaped head were enough to give one bad dreams. A quarter of an hour before, it had bit savagely at him. Now it stood breathing deep, and trembling while its master let his hand pass gently over the nose and neck with soft words that slowly won the pony back from the terror into which it had worked itself.

"You did well, Mr. Fraser from Texas," Jed complimented him, with a smile that thinly hid his malice. "But it won't do to have you going back to Texas with the word that Wyoming is shy of riders. I ain't any great shakes, but I reckon I'll have to take a whirl at Rocking Horse." He had decided to ride for two reasons. One was that he

had glimpsed the girl among the firs; the other was to dissipate the admiration his rival had created among the men.

Briscoe lounged toward the remuda, rope in hand. It was his cue to get himself up picturesquely in all the paraphernalia of the cowboy. Black-haired and white-toothed, lithe as a wolf, and endowed with a grace almost feline, it was easy to understand how this man appealed to the imagination of the reckless young fellows of this primeval valley. Everything he did was done well. Furthermore, he looked and acted the part of leader which he assumed.

Rocking Horse was in a different mood from its brother. It was hard to rope, and when Jed's rawhide had fallen over its head it was necessary to reenforce the lariat with two others. Finally the pony had to be flung down before a saddle could be put on. When Siegfried, who had been kneeling on its head, stepped back, the outlaw staggered to its feet, already badly shaken, to find an incubus clamped to the saddle.

No matter how it pitched, the human clothespin stuck to his seat, and apparently with as little concern as if he had been in a rowboat gently moved to and fro by the waves. Jed rode like a centaur, every motion attuned to those of the animal as much as if he were a part of it. No matter how it pounded or tossed, he stuck securely to the hurricane deck of the broncho.

Once only he was in danger, and that because Rocking Horse flung furiously against the wheel of a wagon and ground the rider's leg till he grew dizzy with the pain. For an instant he caught at the saddle horn to steady himself as the roan bucked into the open again.

"He's pulling leather!" some one shouted.

"Shut up, you goat!" advised the Texan good-naturedly. "Can't you see his laig got jammed till he's groggy? Wonder is, he didn't take the dust! They don't raise better riders than he is."

"By hockey! He's all in. Look out! Jed's falling," France cried, running forward.

It looked so for a moment, then Jed swam back to clear consciousness again, and waved them back. He began to use his quirt without mercy.

"Might know he'd game it out," remarked Yorky.

He did. It was a long fight, and the horse was flecked with bloody foam before its spirit and strength failed. But the man in the saddle kept his seat till the victory was won.

Steve was on the spot to join heartily the murmur of applause, for he was too good a sportsman to grudge admiration even to his enemy.

"You're the one best bet in riders, Mr. Briscoe. It's a pleasure to watch you," he said frankly.

Jed's narrowed eyes drifted to him. "Oh, hell!" he drawled with insolent contempt, and turned on his heel.

From the clump of firs a young woman was descending, and Jed went to meet her.

"You rode splendidly," she told him with vivid eyes. "Were you hurt when you were jammed again the wagon? I mean, does it still hurt?" For she noticed that he walked with a limp.

"I reckon I can stand the grief without an amputation. Arlie, I got something to tell you."

She looked at him in her direct fashion and waited.

"It's about your new friend." He drew from a pocket some leaves torn out of a magazine. His finger indicated a picture. "Ever see that gentleman before?"

The girl looked at it coolly. "It seems to be Mr. Fraser taken in his uniform; Lieutenant Fraser, I should say."

The cattleman's face fell. "You know, then, who he is, and what he's doing here."

Without evasion, her gaze met his. "I understood him to say he was an officer in the Texas Rangers. You know why he is here."

"You're right, I do. But do you?"

"Well, what is it you mean? Out with it, Jed," she demanded impatiently.

"He is here to get a man wanted in Texas, a man hiding in this valley right now."

"I don't believe it," she returned quickly. "And if he is, that's not your business or mine. It's his duty, isn't it?"

"I ain't discussing that. You know the law of the valley, Arlie."

"I don't accept that as binding, Jed. Lots of people here don't. Because Lost Valley used to be a nest of miscreants, it needn't always be. I don't see what right we've got to set ourselves above the law."

"This valley has always stood by hunted men when they reached it. That's our custom, and I mean to stick to it."

"Very well. I hold you to that," she answered quickly. "This man Fraser is a hunted man. He's hunted because of what he did for me and dad. I claim the protection of the valley for him."

"He can have it—if he's what he says he is. But why ain't he been square with us? Why didn't he tell who he was?"

"He told me."

"That ain't enough, Arlie. If he did, you kept it quiet. We all had a right to know."

"If you had asked him, he would have told you."

"I ain't so sure he would. Anyhow, I don't like it. I believe he is here to get the man I told you of. Mebbe that ain't all."

"What more?" she scoffed.

"This fellow is the best range detective in the country. My notion is he's spying around about that Squaw Creek raid."

Under the dusky skin she flushed angrily. "My

notion is you're daffy, Jed. Talk sense, and I'll listen to you. You haven't a grain of proof."

"I may get some yet," he told her sulkily.

She laughed her disbelief. "When you do, let me know."

And with that she gave her pony the signal to more forward.

Nevertheless, she met the ranger at the foot of the little hill with distinct coldness. When he came up to shake hands, she was too busy dismounting to notice.

"Your heart must be a good deal better. I suppose Lost Valley agrees with you." She had swung down on the other side of the horse, and her glance at him across the saddle seat was like a rapier thrust.

He was aware at once of being in disgrace with her, and it chafed him that he had no adequate answer to her implied charge.

"My heart's all right," he said a little gruffly.

"Yes, it seems to be, lieutenant."

She trailed the reins and turned away at once to find her father. The girl was disappointed in him. He had, in effect, lied to her. That was bad enough; but she felt that his lie had concealed something, how much she scarce dared say. Her tangled thoughts were in chaos. One moment she was ready to believe the worst; the next, it was impossible to conceive such a man so vile a spy as to reward hospitality with treachery.

Yet she remembered now that it had been while she was telling of the fate of the traitor Burke that she had driven him to his lie. Or had he not told it first when she pointed out Lost Valley at his feet? Yes, it was at that moment she had noticed his pallor. He had, at least, conscience enough to be ashamed of what he was doing. But she recognized a wide margin of difference between the possibilities of his guilt. It was one thing to come to the valley for an escaped murderer; it was quite another to use the hospitality of his host as a means to betray the friends of that host. Deep in her heart she could not find it possible to convict him of the latter alternative. He was too much a man, too vitally dynamic. No; whatever else he was, she felt sure he was not so hopelessly lost to decency. He had that electric spark of self-respect which may coexist with many faults, but not with treachery.

CHAPTER IX

A SHOT FROM BALD KNOB

A bunch of young steers which had strayed from their range were to be driven to the Dillon ranch, and the boss of the rodeo appointed France and Fraser to the task.

"Yo'll have company home, honey," he told his daughter, "and yo'll be able to give the boys a hand if they need it. These hill cattle are still some wild, though we've been working them a week. Yo're a heap better cowboy than some that works more steady at the business."

Briscoe nodded. "You bet! I ain't forgot that day Arlie rode Big Timber with me two years ago. She wasn't sixteen then, but she herded them hill steers like they belonged to a milk bunch."

He spoke his compliment patly enough, but somehow the girl had an impression that he was thinking of something else. She was right, for as he helped gather the drive his mind was busy with a problem. Presently he dismounted to tighten a cinch, and made a signal to a young fellow known as Slim Leroy. The latter was a new and tender recruit to Jed's band of miscreants. He drew up beside his

leader and examined one of the fore hoofs of his pony.

"Slim, I'm going to have Dillon send you for the mail to-day. When he tells you, that's the first you know about it. Understand? You'll have to take the hill cut to Jack Rabbit Run on your way in. At the cabin back of the aspens, inquire for a man that calls himself Johnson. If he's there, give him this message: 'This afternoon from Bald Knob.' Remember! Just those words, and nothing more. If he isn't there, forget the message. You'll know the man you want because he is shy his trigger finger and has a ragged scar across his right cheek. Make no mistake about this, Slim."

"Sure I won't."

Briscoe, having finished cinching, swung to his saddle and rode up to say good-by to Arlie.

"Hope you'll have no trouble with this bunch. If you push right along you'd ought to get home by night," he told her.

Arlie agreed carelessly. "I don't expect any trouble with them. So-long, Jed."

It would not have been her choice to ride home with the lieutenant of rangers, but since her father had made the appointment publicly she did not care to make objection. Yet she took care to let Fraser see that he was in her black books. The men rode toward the rear of the herd, one on each side, and Arlie fell in beside her old playmate, Dick. She laughed and talked with him about a hundred things

in which Steve could have had no part, even if he had been close enough to catch more than one word out of twenty. Not once did she even look his way. Quite plainly she had taken pains to forget his existence.

"It was Briscoe's turn the other day," mused the Texan. "It's mine now. I wonder when it will be Dick's to get put out in the cold!"

Nevertheless, though he tried to act the philosopher, it cut him that the high-spirited girl had condemned him. He felt himself in a false position from which he could not easily extricate himself. The worst of it was that if it came to a showdown he could not expect the simple truth to exonerate him.

From where they rode there drifted to him occasionally the sound of the gay voices of the young people. It struck him for the first time that he was getting old. Arlie could not be over eighteen, and Dick perhaps twenty-one. Maybe young people like that thought a fellow of twenty-seven a Methusaleh.

After a time the thirsty cattle smelt water and hit a bee line so steadily for it that they needed no watching. Every minute or two one of the leaders stretched out its neck and let out a bellow without slackening its pace.

Steve lazed on his pony, shifting his position to ease his cramped limbs after the manner of the range rider. In spite of himself, his eyes would

drift toward the jaunty little figure on the pinto. The masculine in him approved mightily her lissom grace and the proud lift of her dark head, with its sun-kissed face set in profile to him. He thought her serviceable costume very becoming, from the pinched felt hat pinned to the dark mass of hair, and the red silk kerchief knotted loosely round the pretty throat, to the leggings beneath the corduroy skirt and the flannel waist with sleeves rolled up in summer-girl fashion to leave the tanned arms bare to the dimpled elbows.

The trail, winding through a narrow defile, brought them side by side again.

"Ever notice what a persistent color buckskin is, Steve?" inquired France, by way of bringing him into the conversation. "It's strong in every one of these cattle, though the old man has been trying to get rid of it for ten years."

"You mustn't talk to me, Dick," responded his friend gravely. "Little Willie told a lie, and he's being stood in a corner."

Arlie flushed angrily, opened her mouth to speak, and, changing her mind, looked at him witheringly. He didn't wither, however. Instead, he smiled broadly, got out his mouth organ, and cheerfully entertained them with his favorite, "I Met My Love In the Alamo."

The hot blood under dusky skin held its own in her cheeks. She was furious with him, and dared not trust herself to speak. As soon as they had

passed through the defile she spurred forward, as if to turn the leaders. France turned to his friend and laughed ruefully.

"She's full of pepper, Steve."

The ranger nodded. "She's all right, Dick. If you want to know, she's got a right to make a door-mat of me. I lied to her. I was up against it, and I kinder had to. You ride along and join her. If you want to get right solid, tell her how many kinds of a skunk I am. Worst of it is, I ain't any too sure I'm not."

"I'm sure for you then, Steve," the lad called back, as he loped forward after the girl.

He was so sure, that he began to praise his friend to Arlie, to tell her of what a competent cowman he was, how none of them could make a cut or rope a wild steer like him. She presently wanted to know whether Dick could not find something more interesting to talk about.

He could not help smiling at her downright manner. "You've surely got it in for him, Arlie. I thought you liked him."

She pulled up her horse, and looked at him. "What made you think that? Did he tell you so?"

Dick fairly shouted. "You do rub it in, girl, when you've got a down on a fellow. No, he didn't tell me. You did."

"Me!" she protested indignantly. "I never did."

"Oh, you didn't say so, but I don't need a church

to fall on me before I can take a hint. You acted as though you liked him that day you and him came riding into camp."

"I didn't do any such thing, Dick France. I don't like him at all," very decidedly.

"All the boys do—all but Jed. I don't reckon he does."

"Do I have to like him because the boys do?" she demanded.

"O' course not." Dick stopped, trying to puzzle it out. "He says you ain't to blame, that he lied to you. That seems right strange, too. It ain't like Steve to lie."

"How do you know so much about him? You haven't known him a week."

"That's what Jed says. I say it ain't a question of time. Some men I've knew ten years I ain't half so sure of. He's a man from the ground up. Any one could tell that, before they had seen him five minutes."

Secretly, the girl was greatly pleased. She so wanted to believe that Dick was right. It was what she herself had thought.

"I wish you'd seen him the day he pulled Siegfried out of Lost Creek. Tell you, I thought they were both goners," Dick continued.

"I expect it was most ankle-deep," she scoffed. "Hello, we're past Bald Knob!"

"They both came mighty nigh handing in their checks."

"I didn't know that, though I knew, of course, he was fearless," Arlie said.

"What's that?" Dick drew in his horse sharply, and looked back.

The sound of a rifle shot echoed from hillside to hillside. Like a streak of light, the girl's pinto flashed past him. He heard her give a sobbing cry of anguish. Then he saw that Steve was slipping very slowly from his saddle.

A second shot rang out. The light was beginning to fail, but he made out a man's figure crouched among the small pines on the shoulder of Bald Knob. Dick jerked out his revolver as he rode back, and fired twice. He was quite out of pistol range, but he wanted the man in ambush to see that help was at hand. He saw Arlie fling herself from her pony in time to support the Texan just as he sank to the ground.

"She'll take care of Steve. It's me for that murderer," the young man thought.

Acting upon that impulse, he slid from his horse and slipped into the sagebrush of the hillside. By good fortune he was wearing a gray shirt of a shade which melted into that of the underbrush. Night falls swiftly in the mountains, and already dusk was softly spreading itself over the hills.

Dick went up a draw, where young pines huddled together in the trough; and from the upper end of this he emerged upon a steep ridge, eyes and ears

alert for the least sign of human presence. A third shot had rung out while he was in the dense mass of foliage of the evergreens, but now silence lay heavy all about him. The gathering darkness blurred detail, so that any one of a dozen bowlders might be a shield for a crouching man.

Once, nerves at a wire edge from the strain on him, he thought he saw a moving figure. Throwing up his gun, he fired quickly. But he must have been mistaken, for, shortly afterward, he heard some one crashing through dead brush at a distance.

"He's on the run, whoever he is. Guess I'll get back to Steve," decided France wisely.

He found his friend stretched on the ground, with his head in Arlie's lap.

"Is it very bad?" he asked the girl.

"I don't know. There's no light. Whatever shall we do?" she moaned.

"I'm a right smart of a nuisance, ain't I?" drawled the wounded man unexpectedly.

She leaned forward quickly. "Where are you hit?"

"In the shoulder, ma'am."

"Can you ride, Steve? Do you reckon you could make out the five miles?" Dick asked.

Arlie answered for him. She had felt the inert weight of his heavy body and knew that he was beyond helping himself. "No. Is there no house near? There's Alec Howard's cabin."

"He's at the round-up, but I guess we had better take Steve there—if we could make out to get him that far."

The girl took command quietly. "Unsaddle Teddy."

She had unloosened his shirt and was tying her silk kerchief over the wound, from which blood was coming in little jets.

"We can't carry him," she decided. "It's too far. We'll have to lift him to the back of the horse, and let him lie there. Steady, Dick. That's right. You must hold him on, while I lead the horse."

Heavy as he was, they somehow hoisted him, and started. He had fainted again, and hung limply, with his face buried in the mane of the pony. It seemed an age before the cabin loomed, shadow-like, out of the darkness. They found the door unlocked, as usual, and carried him in to the bed.

"Give me your knife, Dick," Arlie ordered quietly. "And I want water. If that's a towel over there, bring it."

"Just a moment. I'll strike a light, and we'll see where we're at."

"No. We'll have to work in the dark. A light might bring them down on us." She had been cutting the band of the shirt, and now ripped it so as to expose the wounded shoulder.

Dick took a bucket to the creek, and presently returned with it. In his right hand he carried his

revolver. When he reached the cabin he gave an audible sigh of relief and quickly locked the door.

"Of course you'll have to go for help, Dick. Bring old Doc Lee."

"Why, Arlie, I can't leave you here alone. What are you talking about?"

"You'll have to. It's the only thing to do. You'll have to give me your revolver. And, oh, Dick, don't lose a moment on the way."

He was plainly troubled. "I just *can't* leave you here alone, girl. What would your father say if anything happened? I don't reckon anything will, but we can't tell. No, I'll stay here, too. Steve must take his chance."

"You'll not stay." She flamed round upon him, with the fierce passion of a tigress fighting for her young. "You'll go this minute—this very minnte!"

"But don't you see I oughtn't to leave you? Anybody would tell you that," he pleaded.

"And you call yourself his friend," she cried, in a low, bitter voice.

"I call myself yours, too," he made answer doggedly.

"Then go. Go this instant. You'll go, anyway; but if you're my friend, you'll go gladly, and bring help to save us both."

"I wisht I knew what to do," he groaned.

Her palms fastened on his shoulders. She was a creature transformed. Such bravery, such feminine ferocity, such a burning passion of the spirit, was

altogether outside of his experience of her or any other woman. He could no more resist her than he could fly to the top of Bald Knob.

"I'll go, Arlie."

"And bring help soon. Get Doc Lee here soon as you can. Leave word for armed men to follow. Don't wait for them."

"No."

"Take his Teddy horse. It can cover ground faster than yours."

"Yes."

With plain misgivings, he left her, and presently she heard the sound of his galloping horse. It seemed to her for a moment as if she must call him back, but she strangled the cry in her throat. She locked the door and bolted it, then turned back to the bed, upon which the wounded man was beginning to moan in his delirium.

CHAPTER X

DOC LEE

Arlie knew nothing of wounds or their treatment. All she could do was to wash the shoulder in cold water and bind it with strips torn from her white underskirt. When his face and hands grew hot with the fever, she bathed them with a wet towel. How badly he was hurt—whether he might not even die before Dick's return—she had no way of telling. His inconsequent babble at first frightened her, for she had never before seen a person in delirium, nor heard of the insistence with which one harps upon some fantasy seized upon by a diseased mind.

"She thinks you're a skunk, Steve. So you are. She's dead right—dead right—dead right. You lied to her, you coyote! Stand up in the corner, you liar, while she whangs at you with a six-gun! You're a skunk—dead right."

So he would run on in a variation of monotony, the strong, supple, masterful man as helpless as a child, all the splendid virility stricken from him by the pressure of an enemy's finger. The eyes that she had known so full of expression, now like half-

scabbarded steel, and now again bubbling from the inner mirth of him, were glazed and unmeaning. The girl had felt in him a capacity for silent self-containment; and here he was, picking at the coverlet with restless fingers, prattling foolishly, like an infant.

She was a child of impulse, sensitive and plastic. Because she had been hard on him before he was struck down, her spirit ran open-armed to make amends. What manner of man he was she did not know. But what availed that to keep her, a creature of fire and dew, from the clutch of emotions strange and poignant? He had called himself a liar and a coyote, yet she knew it was not true, or at worst, true in some qualified sense. He might be hard, reckless, even wicked in some ways. But, vaguely, she felt that if he were a sinner he sinned with self-respect. He was in no moral collapse, at least. It was impossible to fit him to her conception of a spy. No, no! Anything but that!

So she sat there, her fingers laced about her knee, as she leaned forward to wait upon the needs she could imagine for him, the dumb tragedy of despair in her childish face.

The situation was one that made for terror. To be alone with a wounded man, his hurt undressed, to hear his delirium and not to know whether he might not die any minute—this would have been enough to cause apprehension. Add to it the dark-

ness, her deep interest in him, the struggle of her soul, and the dread of unseen murder stalking in the silent night.

Though her thought was of him, it was not wholly upon him. She sat where she could watch the window, Dick's revolver in another chair beside her. It was a still, starry night, and faintly she could see the hazy purple, mountain line. Somewhere beneath those uncaring stars was the man who had done this awful thing. Was he far, or was he near? Would he come to make sure he had not failed? Her fearful heart told her that he would come.

She must have fought her fears nearly an hour before she heard the faintest of sounds outside. Her hand leaped to the revolver. She sat motionless, listening, with nerves taut. It came again presently, a deadened footfall, close to the door. Then, after an eternity, the latch clicked softly. Some one, with infinite care, was trying to discover whether the door was locked.

His next move she anticipated. Her eyes fastened on the window, while she waited breathlessly. Her heart was hammering furiously. Moments passed, in which she had to set her teeth to keep from screaming aloud. The revolver was shaking so that she had to steady the barrel with her left hand. A shadow crossed one pane, the shadow of a head in profile, and pushed itself forward till

shoulders, arm, and poised revolver covered the lower sash. Very, very slowly the head itself crept into sight.

Arlie fired and screamed simultaneously. The thud of a fall, the scuffle of a man gathering himself to his feet again, the rush of retreating steps, all merged themselves in one single impression of fierce, exultant triumph.

Her only regret was that she had not killed him. She was not even sure that she had hit him, for her bullet had gone through the glass within an inch of the inner woodwork. Nevertheless, she knew that he had had a shock that would carry him far. Unless he had accomplices with him—and of that there had been no evidence at the time of the attack from Bald Knob—he would not venture another attempt. Of one thing she was sure. The face that had looked in at the window was one she had never seen before. In this, too, she found relief —for she knew now that the face she had expected to see follow the shadow over the pane had been that of Jed Briscoe; and Jed had too much of the courage of Lucifer incarnate in him to give up because an unexpected revolver had been fired in his face.

Time crept slowly, but it could hardly have been a quarter of an hour later that she heard the galloping of horses.

"It is Dick!" she cried joyfully, and, running to the door, she unbolted and unlocked it just as

France dragged Teddy to a halt and flung himself to the ground.

The young man gave a shout of gladness at sight of her.

"Is it all right, Arlie?"

"Yes. That is—I don't know. He is delirious. A man came to the window, and I shot at him. Oh, Dick, I'm *so* glad you're back."

In her great joy, she put her arms round his neck and kissed him. Old Doctor Lee, dismounting more leisurely, drawled his protest.

"Look-a-here, Arlie. I'm the doctor. Where do I come in?"

"I'll kiss you, too, when you tell me he'll get well." The half-hysterical laugh died out of her voice, and she caught him fiercely by the arm. "Doc, doc, don't let him die," she begged.

He had known her all her life, had been by the bedside when she came into the world, and he put his arm round her shoulders and gave her a little hug as they passed into the room.

"We'll do our level best, little girl."

She lit a lamp, and drew the window curtain, so that none could see from the outside. While the old doctor arranged his instruments and bandages on chairs, she waited on him. He noticed how white she was, for he said, not unkindly:

"I don't want two patients right now, Arlie. If you're going to keel over in a faint right in the middle of it, I'll have Dick help."

"No, no, I won't, doc. Truly, I won't," she promised.

"All right, little girl. We'll see how game you are. Dick, hold the light. Hold it right there. See?"

The Texan had ceased talking, and was silent, except for a low moan, repeated at regular intervals. The doctor showed Arlie how to administer the anaesthetic after he had washed the wound. While he was searching for the bullet with his probe she flinched as if he had touched a bare nerve, but she stuck to her work regardless of her feelings, until the lead was found and extracted and the wound dressed.

Afterward, Dick found her seated on a rock outside crying hysterically. He did not attempt to cope with the situation, but returned to the house and told Lee.

"Best thing for her. Her nerves are overwrought and unstrung. She'll be all right, once she has her cry out. I'll drift around, and jolly her along."

The doctor presently came up and took a seat beside her.

"Wha—what do you think, doctor?" she sobbed.

"Well, I think it's tarnation hot operating with a big kerosene lamp six inches from your haid," he said, as he mopped his forehead.

"I mean—will he—get well?"

Lee snorted. "Well, I'd be ashamed of him if

he didn't. If he lets a nice, clean, flesh wound put him out of business he don't deserve to live. Don't worry any about him, young lady. Say, I wish I had *zwei* beer right now, Arlie."

"You mean it? You're not just saying it to please me?"

"Of course, I mean it," he protested indignantly. "I wish I had *three*."

"I mean, are you sure he'll get well?" she explained, a faint smile touching her wan face.

"Yes, I mean that, too, but right now I mean the beer most. Now, honest, haven't I earned a beer?"

"You've earned a hundred thousand, doc. You're the kindest and dearest man that ever lived," she cried.

"Ain't that rather a large order, my dear?" he protested mildly. "I couldn't really use a hundred thousand. And I'd hate to be better than Job and Moses and Pharaoh and them Bible characters. Wouldn't I have to give up chewing? Somehow, a halo don't seem to fit my haid. It's most too bald to carry one graceful. . . . You may do that again if you want to." This last, apropos of the promised reward which had just been paid in full.

Arlie found she could manage a little laugh by this time.

"Well, if you ain't going to, we might as well go in and have a look at that false-alarm patient of ours," he continued. "We'll have to sit up all night

with him. I was sixty-three yesterday. I'm going to quit this doctor game. I'm too old to go racing round the country nights just because you young folks enjoy shooting each other up. Yes, ma'am, I'm going to quit. I serve notice right here. What's the use of having a good ranch and some cattle if you can't enjoy them?"

As the doctor had been serving notice of his intention to quit doctoring for over ten years, Arlie did not take him too seriously. She knew him for what he was—a whimsical old fellow, who would drop in the saddle before he would let a patient suffer; one of the old school, who loved his work but liked to grumble over it.

"Maybe you'll be able to take a rest soon. You know that young doctor from Denver, who was talking about settling here——"

This, as she knew, was a sore point with him. "So you're tired of me, are you? Want a new-fangled appendix cutter from Denver, do you? Time to shove old Doc Lee aside, eh?"

"I didn't say that, doc," she repented.

"Huh! You meant it. Wonder how many times he'd get up at midnight and plow through three-foot snow for six miles to see the most ungrateful, squalling little brat——"

"Was it me, doc?" she ungrammatically demanded.

"It was you, Miss Impudence."

They had reached the door, but she held him there a moment, while she laughed delightedly and hugged him. "I knew it was me. As if we'd let our old doc go, or have anything to do with a young ignoramus from Denver! Didn't you know I was joking? Of course you did."

He still pretended severity. "Oh, I know *you.* When it comes to wheedling an old fool, you've got the rest of the girls in this valley beat to a fare-you-well."

"Is that why you always loved me?" she asked, with a sparkle of mischief in her eye.

"I didn't love you. I never did. The idea!" he snorted. "I don't know what you young giddy pates are coming to. Huh! Love you!"

"I'll forgive you, even if you did," she told him sweetly.

"That's it! That's it!" he barked. "You forgive all the young idiots when they do. And they all do—every last one of them. But I'm too old for you, young lady. Sixty-three yesterday. Huh!"

"I like you better than the younger ones."

"Want us all, do you? Young and old alike. Well, count me out."

He broke away, and went into the house. But there was an unconquerably youthful smile dancing in his eyes. This young lady and he had made love to each other in some such fashion ever since she had been a year old. He was a mellow and

confirmed old bachelor, but he proposed to continue their innocent coquetry until he was laid away, no matter which of the young bucks of the valley had the good fortune to win her for a wife.

CHAPTER XI

THE FAT IN THE FIRE

For two days Fraser remained in the cabin of the stockman Howard, France making it his business to see that the place was never left unguarded for a moment. At the end of that time the fever had greatly abated, and he was doing so well that Doctor Lee decided it would be better to move him to the Dillon ranch for the convenience of all parties.

This was done, and the patient continued steadily to improve. His vigorous constitution, helped by the healthy, clean, outdoor life he had led, stood him in good stead. Day by day he renewed the blood he had lost. Soon he was eating prodigious dinners, and between meals was drinking milk with an egg beaten in it.

On a sunny forenoon, when he lay in the big window of the living room, reading a magazine, Arlie entered, a newspaper in her hand. Her eyes were strangely bright, even for her, and she had a manner of repressed excitement. Her face was almost colorless.

"Here's some more in the *Avalanche* about our

adventure near Gimlet Butte," she told him, waving the paper.

"Nothing like keeping in the public eye," said Steve, grinning. "I don't reckon our little picnic at Bald Knob is likely to get in the *Avalanche,* though. It probably hasn't any correspondent at Lost Valley. Anyhow, I'm hoping not."

"Mr. Fraser, there is something in this paper I want you to explain. But tell me first when it was you shot this man Faulkner. I mean at just what time in the fight."

"Why, I reckon it must have been just before I ducked."

"That's funny, too." She fixed her direct, fearless gaze on him. "The evidence at the coroner's jury shows that it was in the early part of the fight he was shot, *before father and I left you.*"

"No, that couldn't have been, Miss Arlie, because——"

"Because——" she prompted, smiling at him in a peculiar manner.

He flushed, and could only say that the newspapers were always getting things wrong.

"But this is the evidence at the coroner's inquest," she said, falling grave again on the instant. "I understand one thing now, very clearly, and that is that Faulkner was killed early in the fight, and the other man was wounded in the ankle near the finish."

He shook his head obstinately. "No, I reckon not."

"Yet it is true. What's more, you knew it all the time."

"You ce'tainly jump to conclusions, Miss Arlie."

"And you let them arrest you, without telling them the truth! And they came near lynching you! And there's a warrant out now for your arrest for the murder of Faulkner, *while all the time I killed him, and you knew it!*"

He gathered together his lame defense. "You run ahaid too fast for me, ma'am. Supposing he was hit while we were all there together, how was I to know who did it?"

"You knew it couldn't have been you, for he wasn't struck with a revolver. It couldn't have been dad, since he had his shotgun loaded with buckshot."

"What difference did it make?" he wanted to know impatiently. "Say I'd have explained till kingdom come that I borrowed the rifle from a friend five minutes after Faulkner was hit—would anybody have believed me? Would it have made a bit of difference?"

Her shining eyes were more eloquent than a thousand tongues. "I don't say it would, but there was always the chance. You didn't take it. You would have let them hang you, without speaking the word that brought me into it. Why?"

"I'm awful obstinate when I get my back up," he smiled.

"That wasn't it. You did it to save a girl you had never seen but once. I want to know why."

"All right. Have it your own way. But don't ask me to explain the whyfors. I'm no Harvard professor."

"I know," she said softly. She was not looking at him, but out of the window, and there were tears in her voice.

"Sho! Don't make too much of it. We'll let it go that I ain't all coyote, after all. But that don't entitle me to any reward of merit. Now, don't you cry, Miss Arlie. Don't you."

She choked back the tears, and spoke in deep self-scorn. "No! You don't deserve anything except what you've been getting from me—suspicion and distrust and hard words! You haven't done anything worth speaking of—just broke into a quarrel that wasn't yours, at the risk of your life; then took it on your shoulders to let us escape; and, afterward, when you were captured, refused to drag me in, because I happen to be a girl! But it's not worth mentioning that you did all this for strangers, and that later you did not tell even me, because you knew it would trouble me that I had killed him, though in self-defense. And to think that all the time I've been full of hateful suspicions about you! Oh, you don't know how I despise myself!"

She let her head fall upon her arm on the table, and sobbed.

Fraser, greatly disturbed, patted gently the heavy coil of blue-black hair.

"Now, don't you, Arlie; don't you. I ain't worth it. Honest, I ain't. I did what it was up to me to do. Not a thing more. Dick would have done it. Any of the boys would. Now, let's look at what you've done for me."

From under the arm a muffled voice insisted she had done nothing but suspect him.

"Hold on, girl. Play fair. First off you ride sixty miles to help me when I'm hunted right hard. You bring me to your home in this valley where strangers ain't over and above welcome just now. You learn I'm an officer and still you look out for me and fight for me, till you make friends for me. It's through you I get started right with the boys. On your say-so they give me the glad hand. You learn I've lied to you, and two or three hours later you save my life. You sit there steady, with my haid in your lap, while some one is plugging away at us. You get me to a house, take care of my wounds, and hold the fort alone in the night till help comes. Not only that, but you drive my enemy away. Later, you bring me home, and nurse me like I was a long-lost brother. What I did for you ain't in the same class with what you've done for me."

"But I was suspicious of you all the time."

"So you had a right to be. That ain't the point, which is that a girl did all that for a man she thought might be an enemy and a low-down spy. Men are expected to take chances like I did, but girls ain't. You took 'em. If I lived a thousand years, I couldn't tell you all the thanks I feel."

"Ah! It makes it worse that you're that kind of a man. But I'm going to show you whether I trust you." Her eyes were filled with the glad light of her resolve. She spoke with a sort of proud humility. "Do you know, there was a time when I thought you might have—I didn't really believe it, but I thought it just possible—that you might have come here to get evidence against the Squaw Creek raiders? You'll despise me, but it's the truth."

His face lost color. "And now?" he asked quietly.

"Now? I would as soon suspect my father—or myself! I'll show you what I think. The men in it were Jed Briscoe and Yorky and Dick France——"

"Stop," he cried hoarsely.

"Is it your wound?" she said quickly.

"No. That's all right. But you musn't tell——"

"I'm telling, to show whether I trust you. Jed and Yorky and Dick and Slim——"

She stopped to listen. Her father's voice was calling her. She rose from her seat.

"Wait a moment. There's something I've got to tell you," the Texan groaned.

"I'll be back in a moment. Dad wants to see me about some letters."

And with that she was gone. Whatever the business was, it detained her longer than she expected. The minutes slipped away, and still she did not return. A step sounded in the hall, a door opened, and Jed Briscoe stood before him.

"You're here, are you?" he said.

The Texan measured looks with him. "Yes, I'm here."

"Grand-standing still, I reckon."

"If you could only learn to mind your own affairs," the Texan suggested evenly.

"You'll wish I could before I'm through with you."

"Am I to thank you for that little courtesy from Bald Knob the other evening?"

"Not directly. At three hundred yards, I could have shot a heap straighter than that. The fool must have been drunk."

"You'll have to excuse him. It was beginning to get dark. His intentions were good."

There was a quick light step behind him, and Arlie came into the room. She glanced quickly from one to the other, and there was apprehension in her look.

"I've come to see Lieutenant Fraser on business,"

Briscoe explained, with an air patently triumphant.

Arlie made no offer to leave the room. "He's hardly up to business yet, is he?" she asked, as carelessly as she could.

"Then we'll give it another name. I'm making a neighborly call to ask how he is, and to return some things he lost."

Jed's hand went into his pocket and drew forth leisurely a photograph. This he handed to Arlie right side up, smiling the while, with a kind of masked deviltry.

"Found it in Alec Howard's cabin. Seems your coat was hanging over the back of a chair, lieutenant, and this and a paper fell out. One of the boys must have kicked it to one side, and it was overlooked. Later, I ran across it. So I'm bringing it back to you."

In spite of herself Arlie's eyes fell to the photograph. It was a snapshot of the ranger and a very attractive young woman. They were smiling into each other's eyes with a manner of perfect and friendly understanding. To see it gave Arlie a pang. Flushing at her mistake, she turned the card over and handed it to the owner.

"Sorry. I looked without thinking," she said in a low voice.

Fraser nodded his acceptance of her apology, but his words and his eyes were for his enemy. "You mentioned something else you had found, seems to me."

Behind drooping eyelids Jed was malevolently feline. "Seems to me I did."

From his pocket came slowly a folded paper. He opened and looked it over at leisure before his mocking eyes lifted again to the wounded man. "This belongs to you, too, but I know you'll excuse me if I keep it to show to the boys before returning it."

"So you've read it," Arlie broke in scornfully.

He grinned at her, and nodded. "Yes, I've read it, my dear. I had to read it, to find out whose it was. Taken by and large, it's a right interesting document, too."

He smiled at the ranger maliciously, yet with a certain catlike pleasure in tormenting his victim. Arlie began to feel a tightening of her throat, a sinking of the heart. But Fraser looked at the man with a quiet, scornful steadfastness. He knew what was coming, and had decided upon his course.

"Seems to be a kind of map, lieutenant. Here's Gimlet Butte and the Half Way House and Sweetwater Dam and the blasted pine. Looks like it might be a map from the Butte to this part of the country. Eh, Mr. Fraser from Texas?"

"And if it is?"

"Then I should have to ask you how you come by it, seeing as the map is drawn on Sheriff Brandt's official stationery," Jed rasped swiftly.

"I got it from Sheriff Brandt, Mr. Briscoe, since you want to know. You're not entitled to the in-

formation, but I'll make you a gift of it. He gave it to me to guide me here."

Even Briscoe was taken aback. He had expected evasion, denial, anything but a bold acceptance of his challenge. His foe watched the wariness settle upon him by the narrowing of his eyes.

"So the sheriff knew you were coming?"

"Yes."

"I thought you broke jail. That was the story I had dished up to me."

"I did, with the help of the sheriff."

"Oh, with the help of the sheriff? Come to think of it, that sounds right funny—a sheriff helping his prisoner to escape."

"Yet it is true, as it happens."

"I don't doubt it, lieutenant. Fact is, I had some such notion all the time. Now, I wonder why-for he took so friendly an interest in you."

"I had a letter of introduction to him from a friend in Texas. When he knew who I was, he decided he couldn't afford to have me lynched without trying to save me."

"I see. And the map?"

"This was the only part of the country in which I would be safe from capture. He knew I had a claim on some of the Cedar Mountain people, because it was to help them I had got into trouble."

"Yes, I can see that." Arlie nodded quickly. "Of course, that is just what the sheriff would think."

"Folks can always see what they want to, Arlie," Jed commented. "Now, I can't see all that, by a lot."

"It isn't necessary you should, Mr. Briscoe," Fraser retorted.

"Or else I see a good deal more, lieutenant," Jed returned, with his smooth smile. "Mebbe the sheriff helped you on your way because you're such a good detective. He's got ambitions, Brandt has. So has Hilliard, the prosecuting attorney. Happen to see him, by the way?"

"Yes."

Jed nodded. "I figured you had. Yes, it would be Hilliard worked the scheme out, I expect."

"You're a good deal of a detective yourself, Mr. Briscoe," the Texan laughed hardily. "Perhaps I could get you a job in the rangers."

"There may be a vacancy there soon," Jed agreed.

"What's the use of talking that way, Jed? Are you threatening Mr. Fraser? If anything happens to him, I'll remember this," Arlie told him.

"Have I mentioned any threats, Arlie? It is well known that Lieutenant Fraser has enemies here. It don't take a prophet to tell that, after what happened the other night."

"Any more than it takes a prophet to tell that you are one of them."

"I play my own hand. I don't lie down before him, or any other man. He'd better not get in my

way, unless he's sure he's a better man than I am."

"But he isn't in your way," Arlie insisted. "He has told a plain story. I believe every word of it."

"I notice he didn't tell any of his plain story until we proved it on him. He comes through with his story after he's caught with the goods. Don't you know that every criminal that is caught has a smooth explanation?"

"I haven't any doubt Mr. Briscoe will have one when his turn comes," the ranger remarked.

Jed wheeled on him. His eyes glittered menace. "You've said one word too much. I'll give you forty-eight hours to get out of this valley."

"How dare you, Jed—and in my house!" Arlie cried. "I won't have it. I won't have blood shed between you."

"It's up to him," answered the cattleman, his jaw set like a vise. "Persuade him to git out, and there'll be no blood shed."

"You have no right to ask it of him. You ought not——" She stopped, aware of the futility of urging a moral consideration upon the man, and fell back upon the practical. "He couldn't travel that soon, even if he wanted to. He's not strong enough. You know that."

"All right. We'll call it a week. If he's still here a week from to-day, there will be trouble."

With that, he turned on his heel and left the room. They heard his spurs trailing across the

porch and jingling down the steps, after which they caught a momentary vision of him, dark and sinister, as his horse flashed past the window.

The ranger smiled, but rather seriously. "The fat's in the fire now, sure enough, ma'am."

She turned anxiously upon him. "Why did you tell him all that? Why did you let him go away, believing you were here as a spy to trap him and his friends?"

"I let him have the truth. Anyhow, I couldn't have made good with a denial. He had the evidence. I can't keep him from believing what he wants to."

"He'll tell all his friends. He'll exaggerate the facts and stir up sentiment against you. He'll say you came here as a detective, to get evidence against the Squaw Creek raiders."

"*Then he'll tell the truth!*"

She took it in slowly, with a gathering horror. "The truth!" she repeated, almost under her breath. "You don't mean—— You can't mean—— Are you here as a spy upon my friends?"

"I didn't know they were your friends when I took the job. If you'll listen, I'll explain."

Words burst from her in gathering bitterness.

"What is there to explain, sir? The facts cry to heaven. I brought you into this valley, gave you the freedom of our home against my father's first instinct. I introduced you to my friends, and no doubt they told you much you wanted to know.

They are simple, honest folks, who don't know a spy when they see one. And I—fool that I am—I vouched for you. More, I stood between you and the fate you deserved. And, lastly, in my blind conceit, I have told you the names of the men in the Squaw Creek trouble. If I had only known—and I had all the evidence, but I was so blind I would not see you were a snake in the grass."

He put out a hand to stop her, and she drew back as if his touch were pollution. From the other side of the room, she looked across at him in bitter scorn.

"I shall make arrangements to have you taken out of the valley at once, sir."

"You needn't take the trouble, Miss Arlie. I'm not going out of the valley. If you'll have me taken to Alec Howard's shack, which is where you brought me from, I'll be under obligations to you."

"Whatever you are, I'm not going to have your blood on my hands. You've got to leave the valley."

"I have to thank you for all your kindness to me. If you'd extend it a trifle further and listen to what I've got to say, I'd be grateful."

"I don't care to hear your excuses. Go quickly, sir, before you meet the end you deserve, and give up the poor men I have betrayed to you." She spoke in a choked voice, as if she could scarce breathe.

"If you'd only listen before you——"

"I've listened to you too long. I was so sure I knew more than my father, than my friends. I'll listen no more."

The Texan gave it up. "All right, ma'am. Just as you say. If you'll order some kind of a rig for me, I'll not trouble you longer. I'm sorry that it's got to be this way. Maybe some time you'll see it different."

"Never," she flashed passionately, and fled from the room.

He did not see her again before he left. Bobbie came to get him in a light road trap they had. The boy looked at him askance, as if he knew something was wrong. Presently they turned a corner and left the ranch shut from sight in a fold of the hills.

At the first division of the road Fraser came to a difference of opinion with Bobbie.

"Arlie said you was going to leave the valley. She told me I was to take you to Speed's place."

"She misunderstood. I am going to Alec Howard's."

"But that ain't what she told *me*."

Steve took the reins from him, and turned into the trail that led to Howard's place. "You can explain to her, Bobbie, that you couldn't make me see it that way."

An hour later, he descended upon Howard—a big, rawboned ranchman, who had succumbed quickly to a deep friendship for this "Admirable Crichton" of the plains.

"Hello, Steve! Glad to death to see you. Hope you've come to stay, you old pie eater," he cried joyously, at sight of the Texan.

Fraser got down. "Wait here a moment, Bobbie. I want to have a talk with Alec. I may go on with you."

They went into the cabin, and Fraser sat down. He was still far from strong.

"What's up, Steve?" the rancher asked.

"You asked me to stay, Alec. Before I say whether I will or not, I've got a story to tell you. After I've told it, you can ask me again if you want me to stop with you. If you don't ask me, I'll ride off with the boy."

"All right. Fire ahead, old hoss. I'll ask you fast enough."

The Texan told his story from the beginning. Only one thing he omitted—that Arlie had told him the name of the Squaw Creek raiders.

"There are the facts, Alec. You've got them from beginning to end. It's up to you. Do you want me here?"

"Before I answer that, I'll have to put a question myse'f, Steve. Why do you want to stay? Why not leave the valley while you're still able to?"

"Because Jed Briscoe put it up to me that I'd got to leave within a week. I'll go when I'm good and ready."

Alec nodded his appreciation of the point. "Sure. You don't want to sneak out, with yore tail betwixt

yore laigs. That brings up another question, Steve. What about the Squaw Creek sheep raiders? Just for argument, we'll put it that some of them are my friends. You understand—just for argument. Are you still aiming to run them down?"

Fraser met his frank question frankly. "No, Alec, I've had to give up that notion long since—soon as I began to guess they were friends of Miss Arlie. I'm going back to tell Hilliard so. But I ain't going to be run out by Briscoe."

"Good enough. Put her there, son. This shack's yore home till hell freezes over, Steve."

"You haven't any doubts about me, Alec. If you have, better say so now."

"Doubts? I reckon not. Don't I know a man when I see one? I'm plumb surprised at Arlie." He strode to the door, and called to Bobbie: "Roll along home, son. Yore passenger is going to stay a spell with me."

"Of course, I understand what this means, Alec. Jed and his crowd aren't going to be any too well pleased when they learn you have taken me in. They may make you trouble," the ranger said.

The big cow man laughed. "Oh, cut it out, Steve. Jed don't have to O. K. my guest list. Not on yore life. I'm about ready for a ruction with that young man, anyway. He's too blamed bossy. I ain't wearing his brand. Fact is, I been having notions this valley has been suffering from too much Briscoe. Others are sharing that opinion

with me. Ask Dick France. Ask Arlie, for that matter."

"I'm afraid I'm off that young lady's list of friends."

"Sho! She'll come round. She's some hot-haided. It always was her way to get mad first, and find out why afterward. But don't make any mistake about her, Steve. She's the salt of the earth, Arlie Dillon is. She figured it out you wasn't playing it quite on the square with her. Onct she's milled it around a spell, she'll see things different. I've knowed her since she was knee-high, and I tell you she's a game little thoroughbred."

The Texan looked at him a moment, then stared out of the window.

"We won't quarrel about that any, Alec. I'll indorse those sentiments, and then some, even if she did call me a snake in the grass."

CHAPTER XII

THE DANCE

The day after Fraser changed his quarters, Dick France rode up to the Howard ranch. Without alighting, he nodded casually to Alec, and then to his guest.

"Hello, Steve! How's the shoulder?"

"Fine and dandy."

"You moved, I see." The puncher grinned.

"If you see it for yourself, I'll not attempt to deny it."

"Being stood in the corner some more, looks like! Little Willie been telling some more lies?"

"Come in, Dick, and I'll put you wise."

Steve went over the story again. When he mentioned the Squaw Creek raid, he observed that his two friends looked quickly at each other and then away. He saw, however, that Dick took his pledge in regard to the raiders at face value, without the least question of doubt. He made only one comment on the situation.

"If Jed has served notice that he's going after you, Steve, he'll ce'tainly back the play. What's

more, he won't be any too particular how he gets you, just so he gets you. He may come a-shooting in the open. Then, again, he may not. All according to how the notion strikes him."

"That's about it," agreed Howard.

"While it's fresh on my mind, I'll unload some more comfort. You've got an enemy in this valley you don't know about."

"The one that shot me?"

"I ain't been told that. I was to say, 'One enemy more than he knows of.'"

"Who told you to say it?"

"I was to forget to tell you that, Steve."

"Then I must have a friend more than I know of, too."

"I ain't so sure about that. You might call her a hostile friend."

"It's a lady, then. I can guess who."

"Honest, I didn't mean to tell you, Steve. It slipped out."

"I won't hold it against you."

"She sent for me last night, and this morning I dropped round. Now, what do you reckon she wanted with me?"

"Give it up."

"I'm to take a day off and ride around among the boys, so as to see them before Jed does. I'm to load 'em up with misrepresentations about how you and the sheriff happen to be working in cahoots. I gathered that the lady is through with

you, but she don't want your scalp collected by the boys."

"I'm learning to be thankful for small favors," Fraser said dryly. "She figures me up a skunk, but hates to have me massacreed in her back yard. Ain't that about it, Dick?"

"Somewheres betwixt and between," France nodded. "Say, you lads going to the dance at Millikan's?"

"Didn't know there was one."

"Sure. Big doings. Monday night. Always have a dance after the spring round-up. Jed and his friends will be there—that ought to fetch you!" Dick grinned.

"I haven't noticed any pressing invitation to my address yet," said Steve.

"I'm extending it right now. Millikan told me to pass the word among the boys. Everybody and his neighbor invited." Dick lit a cigar, and gathered up his reins. "So-long, boys. I got to be going." Over his shoulder he fired another joyous shot as he cantered away. "I reckon that hostile friend will be there, too, Steve, if *that's* any inducement."

Whether it was an inducement is not a matter of record, but certain it is that the Texan found it easy to decide to go. Everybody in the valley would be there, and absence on his part would be construed as weakness, even as a confession of guilt. He had often observed that a man's friends

are strong for him only when he is strong for himself.

Howard and his guest drove to Millikan's Draw, for the wound of the latter was still too new to stand so long a horseback ride. They arrived late, and the dance was already in full swing. As they stabled and fed the team, they could hear the high notes of the fiddles and the singsong chant of the caller.

"Alemane left. Right han' t'yer pardner, an' gran' right and left. Ev-v-rybody swing."

The ranch house was a large one, the most pretentious in the valley. A large hall opened into a living room and a dining room, by means of large double doors, which had been drawn back, so as to make one room of them.

As they pushed their way through the crowd of rough young fellows who clustered round the door, as if afraid their escape might be cut off, Fraser observed that the floor was already crowded with dancers.

The quadrille came to an end as he arrived, and, after they had seated their partners, red-faced perspiring young punchers swelled the knot around the door.

Alec stayed to chaff with them, while the Texan sauntered across the floor and took a seat on one of the benches which lined the walls. As he did so, a man and his partner, so busy in talk with each other that they had not observed who he was, sat

down beside him in such position that the young woman was next him. Without having looked directly at either of them, Fraser knew that the girl was Arlie Dillon, and her escort Jed Briscoe. She had her back half turned toward him, so that, even after she was seated she did not recognize her neighbor.

Steve smiled pleasantly, and became absorbed in a rather noisy bout of repartee going on between one swain and his lass, not so absorbed, however, as not to notice that he and his unconscious neighbors were becoming a covert focus of attention. He had already noticed a shade of self-consciousness in the greeting of those whom he met, a hint of a suggestion that he was on trial. Among some this feeling was evidently more pronounced. He met more than one pair of eyes that gave back to his genial nod cold hostility.

At such an affair as this, Jed Briscoe was always at his best. He was one of the few men in the valley who knew how to waltz well, and music and rhythm always brought out in him a gay charm women liked. His lithe grace, his assurance, his ease of manner and speech, always differentiated him from the other ranchmen.

No wonder rumor had coupled his name with that of Arlie as her future husband. He knew how to make light love by implication, to skate around the subject skilfully and boldly with innuendo and suggestion.

Arlie knew him for what he was—a man passionate and revengeful, the leader of that side of the valley's life which she deplored. She did not trust him. Nevertheless, she felt his fascination. He made that appeal to her which a graceless young villain often does to a good woman who lets herself become interested in trying to understand the sinner and his sins. There was another reason why just now she showed him special favor. She wanted to blunt the edge of his anger against the Texan ranger, though her reason for this she did not admit even to herself.

She had—oh, she was quite sure of this—no longer any interest in Fraser except the impersonal desire to save his life. Having thought it all over, she was convinced that her friends had nothing to fear from him as a spy. That was what he had tried to tell her when she would not listen.

Deep in her heart she knew why she had not listened. It had to do with that picture of a pretty girl smiling up happily into his eyes—a thing she had not forgotten for one waking moment since. Like a knife the certainty had stabbed her heart that they were lovers. Her experience had been limited. Kodaks had not yet reached Lost Valley as common possessions. In the mountains no girl had her photograph taken beside a man unless they had a special interest in each other. And the manner of these two had implied the possession of a secret not known to the world.

So Arlie froze her heart toward the Texan, all the more because he had touched her girlish imagination to sweet hidden dreams of which her innocence had been unnecessarily ashamed. He had spoken no love to her, nor had he implied it exactly. There had been times she had thought something more than friendship lay under his warm smile. But now she scourged herself for her folly believed she had been unmaidenly, and set her heart to be like flint against him. She had been ready to give him what he had not wanted. Before she would let him guess it she would rather die, a thousand times rather, she told herself passionately.

She presently became aware that attention was being directed toward her and Jed and somebody who sat on the other side of her. Without looking round, she mentioned the fact in a low voice to her partner of the dance just finished. Jed looked up, and for the first time observed the man behind her. Instantly the gayety was sponged from his face.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"That man from Texas."

Arlie felt the blood sting her cheeks. The musicians were just starting a waltz. She leaned slightly toward Jed, and said, in a low voice:

"Did you ask me to dance this with you?"

He had not, but he did now. He got to his feet, with shining eyes, and whirled her off. The girl did not look toward the Texan. Nevertheless, as they circled the room, she was constantly aware of

him. Sitting there, with a smile on his strong face, apparently unperturbed, he gave no hint of the stern fact that he was circled by enemies, any one of whom might carry his death in a hip pocket. His gaze was serene, unabashed, even amused.

The young woman was irritably suspicious that he found her anger amusing, just as he seemed to find the dangerous position in which he was placed. Yet her resentment coexisted with a sympathy for him that would not down. She believed he was marked for death by a coterie of those present, chief of whom was the man smiling down into her face from half-shut, smouldering eyes.

Her heart was a flame of protest against their decree, all the more so because she held herself partly responsible for it. In a panic of repentance, she had told Dick of her confession to the ranger of the names of the Squaw Creek raiders, and France had warned his confederates. He had done this, not because he distrusted Fraser, but because he felt it was their due to get a chance to escape if they wanted to do so.

Always a creature of impulse, Arlie had repented her repentance when too late. Now she would have fought to save the Texan, but the horror of it was that she could not guess how the blow would fall. She tried to believe he was safe, at least until the week was up.

When Dick strolled across the floor, sat down beside Steve, and began casually to chat with him,

she could have thanked the boy with tears. It was equivalent to a public declaration of his intentions. At least, the ranger was not friendless. One of the raiders was going to stand by him. Besides Dick, he might count on Howard; perhaps on others.

Jed was in high good humor. All along the line he seemed to be winning. Arlie had discarded this intruder from Texas and was showing herself very friendly to the cattleman. The suspicion of Fraser which he had disseminated was bearing fruit; and so, more potently, was the word the girl had dropped incautiously. He had only to wait in order to see his rival wiped out. So that, when Arlie put in her little plea, he felt it would not cost him anything to affect a large generosity.

"Let him go, Jed. He is discredited. Folks are all on their guard before him now. He can't do any harm here. Dick says he is only waiting out his week because of your threat. Don't make trouble. Let him sneak back home, like a whipped cur," she begged.

"I don't want any trouble with him, girl. All I ask is that he leave the valley. Let Dick arrange that, and I'll give him a chance."

She thanked him, with a look that said more than words.

It was two hours later, when she was waltzing with Jed again, that Arlie caught sight of a face that disturbed her greatly. It was a countenance

disfigured by a ragged scar, running from the bridge of the nose. She had last seen it gazing into the window of Alec Howard's cabin on a certain never-to-be-forgotten night.

"Who is that man—the one leaning against the door jamb, just behind Slim Leroy?" she asked.

"He's a fellow that calls himself Johnson. His real name is Struve," Jed answered carelessly.

"He's the man that shot the Texas lieutenant," she said.

"I dare say. He's got a good reason for shooting him. The man broke out of the Arizona penitentiary, and Fraser came north to rearrest him. At least, that's my guess. He wouldn't have been here to-night if he hadn't figured Fraser too sick to come. Watch him duck when he learns the ranger's here."

At the first opportunity Arlie signaled to Dick that she wanted to see him. Fraser, she observed, was no longer in the dancing rooms. Dick took her out from the hot room to the porch.

"Let's walk a little, Dick. I want to tell you something."

They sauntered toward the fine grove of pines that ran up the hillside back of the house.

"Did you notice that man with the scar, Dick?" she presently asked.

"Yes. I ain't seen him before. Must be one of the Rabbit Run guys, I take it."

"I've seen him. He's the man that shot your

friend. He was the man I shot at when he looked in the window."

"Sure, Arlie?"

"Dead sure, Dick. He's an escaped convict, and he has a grudge at your friend. He is afraid of him, too. Look out for Lieutenant Fraser to-night. Don't let him wander around outside. If he does, there may be murder done."

Even as she spoke, there came a sound from the wooded hillside—the sound of a stifled cry, followed by an imprecation and the heavy shuffling of feet.

"Listen, Dick!"

For an instant he listened. Then: "There's trouble in the grove, and I'm not armed," he cried.

"Never mind! Go—go!" she shrieked, pushing him forward.

For herself, she turned, and ran like a deer for the house.

Siegfried was sitting on the porch, whittling a stick.

"They—they're killing Steve—in the grove," she panted.

Without a word he rolled off, like a buffalo cow, toward the scene of action.

Arlie pushed into the house and called for Jed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WOLF HOWLS

As Steve strolled out into the moonlight, he left behind him the monotonous thumping of heavy feet and the singsong voice of the caller.

"Birdie fly out,
Crow hop in,
Join all hands
And circle ag'in."

came to him, in the high, strident voice of Lute Perkins. He took a deep breath of fresh, clean air, and looked about him. After the hot, dusty room, the grove, with its green foliage, through which the moonlight filtered, looked invitingly cool. He sauntered forward, climbed the hill up which the wooded patch straggled, and sat down, with his back to a pine.

Behind the valley rampart, he could see the dim, saw-toothed Teton peaks, looking like ghostly shapes in the moonlight. The night was peaceful. Faint and mellow came the sound of jovial romping from the house; otherwise, beneath the distant stars, a perfect stillness held.

How long he sat there, letting thoughts happen

dreamily rather than producing them of gray matter, he did not know. A slight sound, the snapping of a twig, brought his mind to alertness without causing the slightest movement of his body.

His first thought was that, in accordance with dance etiquette in the ranch country, his revolver was in its holster under the seat of the trap in which they had driven over. Since his week was not up, he had expected no attack from Jed and his friends. As for the enemy, of whom Arlie had advised him, surely a public dance was the last place to tempt one who apparently preferred to attack from cover. But his instinct was certain. He did not need to look round to know he was trapped.

"I'm unarmed. You'd better come round and shoot me from in front. It will look better at the inquest," he said quietly.

"Don't move. You're surrounded," a voice answered.

A rope snaked forward and descended over the ranger's head, to be jerked tight, with a suddenness that sent a pain like a knife thrust through the wounded shoulder. The instinct for self-preservation was already at work in him. He fought his left arm free from the rope that pressed it to his side, and dived toward the figure at the end of the rope. Even as he plunged, he found time to be surprised that no revolver shot echoed through the night, and to know that the reason was because his enemies preferred to do their work in silence.

The man upon whom he leaped gave a startled oath and stumbled backward over a root.

Fraser, his hand already upon the man's throat, went down too. Upon him charged men from all directions. In the shadows, they must have hampered each other, for the ranger, despite his wound—his shoulder was screaming with pain—got to his knees, and slowly from his knees to his feet, shaking the clinging bodies from him.

Wrenching his other hand from under the rope, he fought them back as a hurt grizzly does the wolf pack gathered for the kill. None but a very powerful man could ever have reached his feet. None less agile and sinewy than a panther could have beaten them back as at first he did. They fought in grim silence, yet the grove was full of the sounds of battle. The heavy breathing, the beat of shifting feet, the soft impact of flesh striking flesh, the thud of falling bodies—of these the air was vocal. Yet, save for the gasps of sudden pain, no man broke silence save once.

"The snake'll get away yet!" a hoarse voice cried, not loudly, but with an emphasis that indicated strong conviction.

Impossible as it seemed, the ranger might have done it but for an accident. In the struggle, the rope had slipped to a point just below his knees. Fighting his way down the hill, foot by foot, the Texan felt the rope tighten. One of his attackers

flung himself against his chest and he was tripped. The pack was on him again. Here there was more light, and though for a time the mass swayed back and forth, at last they hammered him down by main strength. He was bound hand and foot, and dragged back to the grove.

They faced their victim, panting deeply from their exertions. Fraser looked round upon the circle of distorted faces, and stopped at one. Seen now, with the fury and malignancy of its triumph painted upon it, the face was one to bring bad dreams.

The lieutenant, his chest still laboring heavily, racked with the torture of his torn shoulder, looked into that face out of the only calm eyes in the group.

"So it's you, Struve?"

"Yes, it's me—me and my friends."

"I've been looking for you high and low."

"Well, you've found me," came the immediate exultant answer.

"I reckon I'm indebted to you for this." Fraser moved his shoulder slightly.

"You'll owe me a heap more than that before the night's over."

"Your intentions were good then, I expect. Being shy a trigger finger spoils a man's aim."

"Not always."

"Didn't like to risk another shot from Bald

Knob, eh? Must be some discouraging to hit only once out of three times at three hundred yards, and a scratch at that."

The convict swore. "I'll not miss this time, Mr. Lieutenant."

"You'd better not, or I'll take you back to the penitentiary where I put you before."

"You'll never put another man there, you meddling spy," Struve cried furiously.

"I'm not so sure of that. I know what you've got against me, but I should like to know what kick your friends have coming," the ranger retorted.

"You may have mine, right off the reel, Mr. Fraser, or whatever you call yourself. You came into this valley with a lie on your lips. We played you for a friend, and you played us for suckers. All the time you was in a deal with the sheriff for *you know what.* I hate a spy like I do a rattlesnake."

It was the man Yorky that spoke. Steve's eyes met his.

"So I'm a spy, am I?"

"You know best."

"Anyhow, you're going to shoot me first, and find out afterward?"

"Wrong guess. We're going to *hang you.*" Struve, unable to keep back longer his bitter spleen, hissed this at him.

"Yes, that's about your size, Struve. You can

crow loud now, when the odds are six to one, with the one unarmed and tied at that. But what I want to know is—are you playing fair with your friends? Have you told them that every man in to-night's business will hang, sure as fate? Have you told them of those cowardly murders you did in Arizona and Texas? Have you told them that your life is forfeit, anyway? Do they know you're trying to drag them into your troubles? No? You didn't tell them that. I'm surprised at you, Struve."

"My name's Johnson."

"Not in Arizona, it isn't. Wolf Struve it is there, wanted for murder and other sundries." He turned swiftly from him to his confederates. "You fools, you're putting your heads into a noose. He's in already, and wants you in, too. Test him. Throw the end of that rope over the limb, and stand back, while he pulls me up alone. He daren't—not for his life, he daren't. He knows that whoever pulls on that rope hangs himself as surely as he hangs me."

The men looked at each other, and at Struve. Were they being led into trouble to pay this man's scores off for him? Suspicion stirred uneasily in them.

"That's right, too. Let Johnson pull him up," Slim Leroy said sullenly.

"Sure. You've got more at stake than we have. It's up to you, Johnson," Yorky agreed.

"That's right," a third chipped in.

"We'll all pull together, boys," Struve insinuated. "It's only a bluff of his. Don't let him scare you off."

"He ain't scaring me off any," declared Yorky. "He's a spy, and he's getting what is coming to him. But you're a stranger too, Johnson. I don't trust you any—not any farther than I can see you, my friend. I'll stand for being an aider and abettor, but I reckon if there's any hanging to be done you'll have to be the sheriff," replied Yorky stiffly.

Struve turned his sinister face on one and another of them. His lips were drawn back, so that the wolfish teeth gleamed in the moonlight. He felt himself being driven into a trap, from which there was no escape. He dared not let Fraser go with his life, for he knew that, sooner or later, the ranger would run him to earth, and drag him back to the punishment that was awaiting him in the South. Nor did he want to shoulder the responsibility of murdering this man before five witnesses.

Came the sound of running footsteps.

"What's that?" asked Slim nervously.

"Where are you, Steve?" called a voice.

"Here," the ranger shouted back.

A moment later Dick France burst into the group. "What's doing?" he panted.

The ranger laughed hardily. "Nothing, Dick. Nothing at all. Some of the boys had notions of a necktie party, but they're a little shy of sand. Have you met Mr. Struve, Dick? I know you're ac-

quainted with the others, Mr. Struve is from Yuma. An old friend of mine. Fact is, I induced him to locate at Yuma."

Dick caught at the rope, but Yorky flung him roughly back.

"This ain't your put in, France," he said. "It's up to Johnson." And to the latter: "Get busy, if you're going to."

"He's a spy on you-all, just the same as he is on me," blurted the convict.

"That's a lie, Struve," pronounced the lieutenant evenly. "I'm going to take you back with me, but I've got nothing against these men. I want to announce right now, no matter who tells a different story, that I haven't lost any Squaw Creek raiders and I'm not hunting any."

"You hear? He came into this valley after me."

"Wrong again, Struve. I didn't know you were here. But I know now, and I serve notice that I'm going to take you back with me, dead or alive. That's what I'm paid for, and that's what I'm going to do."

It was amazing to hear this man, with a rope round his neck, announce calmly what he was going to do to the man who had only to pull that rope to send him into eternity. The very audacity of it had its effect.

Slim spoke up. "I don't reckon we better go any farther with this thing, Yorky."

"No, I don't reckon you had," cut in Dick sharply. "I'll not stand for it."

Again the footsteps of a running man reached them. It was Siegfried. He plunged into the group like a wild bull, shook the hair out of his eyes, and planted himself beside Fraser. With one backward buffet of his great arm he sent Johnson heels over head. He caught Yorky by the shoulders, strong man though the latter was, and shook him till his teeth rattled, after which he flung him reeling a dozen yards to the ground. The Norwegian was reaching for Dick when Fraser stopped him.

"That's enough of a clean-up right now, Sig. Dick butted in like you to help me," he explained.

"The durned coyotes!" roared the big Norseman furiously, leaping at Leroy and tossing him over his head as an enraged bull does. He turned upon the other three, shaking his tangled mane, but they were already in flight.

"I'll show them. I'll show them," he kept saying as he came back to the man he had rescued.

"You've showed them plenty, Sig. Cut out the rough house before you maim some of these gents who didn't invite you to their party."

The ranger felt the earth sway beneath him as he spoke. His wound had been torn loose in the fight, and was bleeding. Limply he leaned against the tree for support.

It was at this moment he caught sight of Arlie

and Briscoe as they ran up. Involuntarily he straightened almost jauntily. The girl looked at him with that deep, eager look of fear he had seen before, and met that unconquerable smile of his.

The rope was still round his neck and the coat was stripped from his back. He was white to the lips, and she could see he could scarce stand, even with the support of the pine trunk. His face was bruised and battered. His hat was gone; and hidden somewhere in his crisp short hair was a cut from which blood dripped to the forehead. The bound arm had been torn from its bandages in the unequal battle he had fought. But for all his desperate plight he still carried the invincible look that nothing less than death can rob some men of.

The fretted moonlight, shifting with the gentle motion of the foliage above, fell full upon him now and showed a wet, red stain against the white shirt. Simultaneously outraged nature collapsed, and he began to sink to the ground.

Arlie gave a little cry and ran forward. Before he reached the ground he had fainted; yet scarcely before she was on her knees beside him with his head in her arms.

"Bring water, Dick, and tell Doc Lee to come at once. He'll be in the back room smoking. Hurry!" She looked fiercely round upon the men assembled. "I think they have killed him. Who did this? Was it you, Yorky? Was it you that murdered him?"

"I bane t'ink it take von hoondred of them to do

it," said Siegfried. "Dat fallar, Johnson, he bane at the bottom of it."

"Then why didn't you kill him? Aren't you Steve's friend? Didn't he save your life?" she panted, passion burning in her beautiful eyes.

Siegfried nodded. "I bane Steve's friend, yah! And Ay bane kill Johnson eef Steve dies."

Briscoe, furious at this turn of the tide which had swept Arlie's sympathies back to his enemy, followed Struve as he sneaked deeper into the shadow of the trees. The convict was nursing a sprained wrist when Jed reached him.

"What do you think you've been trying to do, you sap-headed idiot?" Jed demanded. "Haven't you sense enough to choose a better time than one when the whole settlement is gathered to help him? And can't you ever make a clean job of it, you chuckle-minded son of a greaser?"

Struve turned, snarling, on him. "That'll be enough from you, Briscoe. I've stood about all I'm going to stand just now."

"You'll stand for whatever I say," retorted Jed. "You've cooked your goose in this valley by to-night's fool play. I'm the only man that can pull you through. Bite on that fact, Mr. Struve, before you unload your bile on me."

The convict's heart sank. He felt it to be the truth. The last thing he had heard was Siegfried's threat to kill him.

Whether Fraser lived or died he was in a precarious position and he knew it.

"I know you're my friend, Jed," he whined. "I'll do what you say. Stand by me and I'll sure work with you."

"Then if you take my advice you'll sneak down to the corral, get your horse, and light out for the run. Lie there till I see you."

"And Siegfried?"

"The Swede won't trouble you unless this Texan dies. I'll send you word in time if he does."

Later a skulking shadow sneaked into the corral and out again. Once out of hearing, it leaped to the back of the horse and galloped wildly into the night.

CHAPTER XIV

HOWARD EXPLAINS

Two horsemen rode into Millikan's Draw and drew up in front of the big ranch house. To the girl who stepped to the porch to meet them they gave friendly greeting. One of them asked:

"How're things coming, Arlie?"

"Better and better every day, Dick. Yesterday the doctor said he was out of danger."

"It's been a tough fight for Steve," the other broke in. "Proper nursing is what pulled him through. Doc says so."

"Did he say that, Alec? I'll always think it was doc. He fought for that life mighty hard, boys."

Alec Howard nodded: "Doc Lee's the stuff. Here he comes now, talking of angels."

Doctor Lee dismounted and grinned. "Which of you lads is she making love to now?"

Arlie laughed. "He can't understand that I don't make love to anybody but him," she explained to the younger men.

"She never did to me, doc," Dick said regretfully.

"No, we were just talking about you, doc."

"Fire ahead, young woman," said the doctor, with assumed severity. "I'm here to defend myself now."

"Alec was calling you an angel, and I was laughing at him," said the girl demurely.

"An angel—huh!" he snorted.

"I never knew an angel that chewed tobacco, or one that could swear the way you do when you're mad," continued Arlie.

"I don't reckon your acquaintance with angels is much greater than mine, Miss Arlie Dillon. How's the patient?"

"He's always wanting someting to eat, and he's cross as a bear."

"Good for him! Give him two weeks now and he'll be ready to whip his weight in wild cats."

The doctor disappeared within, and presently they could hear his loud, cheerful voice pretending to berate the patient.

Arlie sat down on the top step of the porch.

"Boys, I don't know what I would have done if he had died. It would have been all my fault. I had no business to tell him the names of you boys that rode in the raid, and afterward to tell you that I told him," she accused herself.

"No, you had no business to tell him, though it happens he's safe as a bank vault," Howard commented.

"I don't know how I came to do it," the girl continued. "Jed had made me suspicious of him.

and then I found out something fine he had done for me. I wanted him to know I trusted him. That was the first thing I thought of, and I told it. He tried to stop me, but I'm such an impulsive little fool."

"We all make breaks, Arlie. You'll not do it again, anyhow," France comforted.

Doctor Lee presently came out and pronounced that the wounded man was doing well. "Wants to see you boys. Don't stay more than half an hour. If they get in your way, sweep 'em out, Arlie."

The cowpunchers entered the sick room with the subdued, gingerly tread of professional undertakers.

"I ain't so bad as that yet, boys," the patient laughed. "You're allowed to speak above a whisper. Doc thinks I'll last till night, mebbe, if I'm careful."

They told him all the gossip of the range—how young Ford had run off with Sallie Laundon and got married to her down at the Butte; how Siegfried had gone up and down the valley swearing he would clean out Jack Rabbit Run if Steve died; how Johnson had had another row with Jed and had chosen to take water rather than draw. Both of his visitors, however, had something on their minds they found some difficulty in expressing.

Alec Howard finally broached it.

"Arlie told you the names of some of the boys that were in the Squaw Creek sheep raid. She made a mistake in telling you anything, but we'll let that go in the discard. It ain't necessary that

you should know the names of the others, but I'm going to tell you one of them, Steve."

"No, I don't want to know."

"This is my say-so. His name is Alec Howard."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Alec. I don't know why you have told me."

"Because I want you to know the facts of that raid, Steve. No killing was on the program. That came about in a way none of us could foresee."

"This is how it was, Steve," explained Dick. "Word came that Campeau was going to move his sheep into the Squaw Creek district. Sheep never had run there. It was understood the range there was for our cattle. We had set a dead line, and warned them not to cross it. Naturally, it made us sore when we heard about Campeau.

"So some of us gathered together hastily and rode over. Our intentions were declared. We meant to drive the sheep back and patrol the dead line. It was solemnly agreed that there was to be no shooting, not even of sheep."

The story halted here for a moment before Howard took it up again. "Things don't always come out the way you figure them. We didn't anticipate any trouble. We outnumbered them two to one. We had the advantage of the surprise. You couldn't guess that for anything but a cinch, could you?"

"And it turned out different?"

"One of us stumbled over a rock as we were

creeping forward. Campeau heard us and drew. The first shot came from them. Now, I'm going to tell you something you're to keep under your own hat. It will surprise you a heap when I tell you that one man on our side did all the damage. He was at the haid of the line, and it happens he is a dead shot. He is liable to rages, when he acts like a crazy man. He got one now. Before we could put a stopper on him, he had killed Campeau and Jennings, and wounded the herders. The whole thing was done before you could wink an eye six times. For just about that long we stood there like roped calves. Then we downed the man in his tracks, slammed him with the butt of a revolver."

Howard stopped and looked at the ranger before he spoke again. His voice was rough and hoarse.

"Steve, I've seen men killed before, but I never saw anything so awful as that. It was just like they had been struck by lightning for suddenness. There was that devil scattering death among them and the poor fellows crumpling up like rabbits. I tell you every time I think of it the thing makes me sick."

The ranger nodded. He understood. The picture rose before him of a man in a Berserk rage, stark mad for the moment, playing Destiny on that lonely, moonlit hill. The face his instinct fitted to the irresponsible murderer was that of Jed Briscoe. Somehow he was sure of that, beyond the shadow of a doubt. His imagination conceived that long

ride back across the hills, the deep agonies of silence, the fierce moments of vindictive accusation. No doubt for long the tug of conscience was with them in all their waking hours, for these men were mostly simple-minded cattlemen caught in the web of evil chance.

"That's how it was, Steve. In as long as it takes to empty a Winchester, we were every one of us guilty of a murder we'd each have given a laig to have stopped. We were all in it, all tied together, because we had broke the law to go raiding in the first place. Technically, the man that emptied that rifle wasn't any more guilty than us poor wretches that stood frozen there while he did it. Put it that we might shave the gallows, even then the penitentiary would bury us. There was only one thing to do. We agreed to stand together, and keep mum."

"Is that why you're telling me, Alec?" Fraser smiled.

"We ain't telling you, not legally," the cowpuncher answered coolly. "If you was ever to say we had, Dick and me would deny it. But we ain't worrying any about you telling it. You're a clam, and we know it. No, we're telling you, son, because we want you to know about how it was. The boys didn't ride out to do murder. They rode out simply to drive the sheep off their range."

The Texan nodded. "That's about how I figured it. I'm glad you told me, boys. I reckon I don't need to tell you I'm padlocked in regard to this."

Arlie came to the door and looked in. "It's time you boys were going. Doc said a half hour."

"All right, Arlie," responded Dick. "So-long, Steve. Be good, you old pie eater."

After they had gone, the Texan lay silent for a long time. He understood perfectly their motive in telling him the story. They had not compromised themselves legally, since a denial would have given them two to one in the matter of witnesses. But they wished him to see that, morally, every man but one who rode on that raid was guiltless of the Squaw Creek murders.

Arlie came in presently, and sat down near the window with some embroidery.

"Did the boys tire you?" she asked, noting his unusual silence.

"No. I was thinking about what they told me. They were giving me the inside facts of the Squaw Creek raid."

She looked up in surprise. "They were?" A little smile began to dimple the corners of her mouth. "That's funny, because they had just got through forgiving me for what I told you."

"What they told me was how the shooting occurred."

"I don't know anything about that. When I told you their names I was only telling what I had heard people whisper. That's all I knew."

"You've been troubled because your friends were

in this, haven't you? You hated to think it of them, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes. It has troubled me a lot."

"Don't let it trouble you any more. One man was responsible for all the bloodshed. He went mad and saw red for half a minute. Before the rest could stop him, the slaughter was done. The other boys aren't guilty of that, any more than you or I."

"Oh, I'm glad—I'm glad," she cried softly. Then, looking up quickly to him: "Who was the man?" she asked.

"I don't know. It is better that neither of us should know that."

"I'm glad the boys told you. It shows they trust you."

"They figure me out a white man," he answered carelessly.

"Ah! That's where I made my mistake." She looked at him bravely, though the color began to beat into her cheeks beneath the dusky tan. "Yet I knew it all the time—in my heart. At least, after I had given myself time to think it over. I knew you *couldn't* be that. If I had given you time to explain—but I always think too late."

His eyes, usually so clear and steely, softened at her words. "I'm satisfied if you knew—*in your heart.*"

"I meant——" she began, with a flush.

"Now, don't spoil it, please," he begged.

Under his steady, half-smiling gaze, her eyes fell. Two weeks ago she had been a splendid young creature, as untaught of life as one of the wild forest animals and as unconsciously eager for it. But there had come a change over her, a birth of womanhood from that night when she had stood between Stephen Fraser and death. No doubt she would often regret it, but she had begun to live more deeply. She could never go back to the care-free days when she could look all men in the face with candid, girlish eyes. The time had come to her, as it must to all sensitive of life, when she must drink of it, whether she would or no.

"Because I'd rather you would know it *in your heart* than in your mind," he said.

Something sweet and terrifying, with the tingle and warmth of rare wine in it, began to glow in her veins. Eyes shy, eager, frightened, met his for an instant. Then she remembered the other girl. Something hard as steel ran through her. She turned on her heel and left the room.

CHAPTER XV

THE TEXAN PAYS A VISIT

From that day Fraser had a new nurse. Arlie disappeared, and her aunt replaced her a few hours later and took charge of the patient. Steve took her desertion as an irritable convalescent does, but he did not let his disappointment make him unpleasant to Miss Ruth Dillon.

"I'm a chump," he told himself, with deep disgust. "Hadn't any more sense than to go scaring off the little girl by handing out a line of talk she ain't used to. I reckon now she's done with me proper."

He continued to improve so rapidly that within the prescribed two weeks he was on horseback again, though still a little weak and washed out. His first ride of any length was to the Dillon ranch. Siegfried accompanied him, and across the Norwegian's saddle lay a very business-like rifle.

As they were passing the mouth of a cañon, the ranger put a casual question: "This Jack Rabbit Run, Sig?"

"Yah. More men wanted bane lost in that gulch than any place Ay knows of."

"That so? I'm going in there to-morrow to find that man Struve," his friend announced carelessly.

The big blonde giant looked at him. "Yuh bain't, Steve? Why, yuh bain't fit to tackle a den uh wild cats." An admiring grin lit the Norwegian's face. "Durn my hide, yuh've got 'em all skinned for grit, Steve. Uh course, Ay bane goin' with yuh."

"If it won't get you in bad with your friends I'll be glad to have you, Sig."

"They bain't my friends. Ay bane shook them, an' served notice to that effect."

"Glad of it."

"Yuh bane goin' in after Struve only?"

"Yes. He's the only man I want."

"Then Ay bane go in, and bring heem out to yuh."

Fraser shook his head. "No, old man, I've got to play my own hand."

"Ay t'ink it be a lot safer f'r me to happen in an' get heem," remonstrated Siegfried.

"Safer for me," corrected the lieutenant, smiling. "No, I can't work that way. I've got to take my own chances. You can go along, though, on one condition. You're not to interfere between me and Struve. If some one else butts in, you may ask him why, if you like.

"Ay bane t'ink yuh von fool, Steve. But Ay bane no boss. Vat yuh says goes."

They found Arlie watering geraniums in front of

the house. Siegfried merely nodded to her and passed on to the stables with the horses. Fraser dismounted, offering her his hand and his warm smile.

He had caught her without warning, and she was a little shy of him. Not only was she embarrassed, but she saw that he knew it. He sat down on the step, while she continued to water her flowers.

"You see your bad penny turned up again, Miss Arlie," he said.

"I didn't know you were able to ride yet, Lieutenant Fraser."

"This is my first try at it. Thought I'd run over and say 'Thank you' to my nurse."

"I'll call auntie," she said quickly.

He shook his head. "Not necessary, Miss Arlie. I settled up with her. I was thinking of the nurse that ran off and left me."

She was beginning to recover herself. "You want to thank her for leaving while there was still hope," she said, with a quick little smile.

"Why did you do it? I've been mighty lonesome the past two weeks," he said quietly.

"You would be, of course. You are used to an active outdoor life, and I suppose the boys couldn't get round to see you very often."

"I wasn't thinking of the boys," he meditated aloud.

Arlie blushed; and to hide her embarrassment she called to Jimmie, who was passing: "Bring up

Lieutenant Fraser's Teddy. I want him to see how well we're caring for his horse."

As a diversion, Teddy served very well. Horse and owner were both mightily pleased to see each other. While the animal rubbed its nose against his coat, the ranger teased and petted it.

"Hello, you old Teddy hawss. How air things a-comin', pardner?" he drawled, with a reversion to his Texas speech. "Plumb tickled to death to meet up with yore old master, ain't you? How come it you ain't fallen in love with this young lady and forgot Steve?"

"He thinks a lot of me, too," Arlie claimed promptly.

"Don't blame you a bit, Teddy. I'll ce'tainly shake hands with you on that. But life's jest meetin' and partin', old hawss. I got to take you away for good, day after to-morrow."

"Where are you going?" the girl asked quickly. Then, to cover the swift interest of her question: "But, of course, it is time you were going back to your business."

"No, ma'am, that is just it. Seems to me either too soon or too late to be going."

She had her face turned from him, and was busy over her plants, to hide the tremulous dismay that had shaken her at his news.

She did not ask him what he meant, nor did she ask again where he was going. For the moment, she could not trust her voice to say more.

"Too late, because I've seen in this valley some one I'll never forget, and too soon because that some one will forget me, sure as a gun," he told her.

"Not if you write to him."

"It isn't a *him*. It's my little nurse."

"I'll tell auntie how you feel about it, and I'm sure she won't forget you."

"You know mighty well I ain't talking about auntie."

"Then I suppose you must mean me."

"That's who I'm meaning."

"I think I'll be able to remember you if I try—by Teddy," she answered, without looking at him, and devoted herself to petting the horse.

"Is it—would it be any use to say any more, Arlie?" he asked, in a low voice, as he stood beside her, with Teddy's nose in his hands.

"I—I don't know what you mean, sir. Please don't say anything more about it." Then again memory of the other girl flamed through her. "No, it wouldn't—not a bit of use, not a bit," she broke out fiercely.

"You mean you couldn't——"

The flame in her face, the eyes that met his, as if drawn by a magnet, still held their anger, but mingled with it was a piteous plea for mercy. "I—I'm only a girl. Why don't you let me alone?" she cried bitterly, and hard upon her own words turned and ran from the room.

Steve looked after her in amazed surprise. "Now don't it beat the band the way a woman takes a thing."

Dubiously he took himself to the stable and said good-by to Dillon.

An hour later she went down to dinner still flushed and excited. Before she had been in the room two minutes her father gave her a piece of startling news.

"I been talking to Steve. Gracious, gyurl, what do you reckon that boy's a-goin' to do?"

Arlie felt the color leap into her cheeks.

"What, dad?"

"He's a'goin' back to Gimlet Butte, to give himself up to Brandt, day after to-morrow."

"But—what for?" she gasped.

"Durned if I know! He's got some fool notion about playin' fair. Seems he came into the Cedar Mountain country to catch the Squaw Creek raiders. Brandt let him escape on that pledge. Well, he's give up that notion, and now he thinks, dad gum it, that it's up to him to surrender to Brandt again."

The girl's eyes were like stars. "And he's going to go back there and give himself up, to be tried for killing Faulkner."

Dillon scratched his head. "By gum, gyurl, I didn't think of that. We cayn't let him go."

"Yes, we can."

"Why, honey, he didn't kill Faulkner, looks like.

We cayn't let him go back there and take our medicine for us. Mebbe he would be lynched. It's a sure thing he'd be convicted."

"Never mind. Let him go. I've got a plan, dad." Her vivid face was alive with the emotion which spoke in it. "When did he say he was going?" she asked buoyantly.

"Day after to-morow. Seems he's got business that keeps him hyer to-morrow. What's yore idee, honey?"

She got up, and whispered it in his ear. His jaw dropped, and he stared at her in amazement.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WOLF BITES

Steve came drowsily to consciousness from confused dreams of a cattle stampede and the click of rifles in the hands of enemies who had the drop on him. The rare, untempered sunshine of the Rockies poured into his window from a world outside, wonderful as the early morning of creation. The hillside opposite was bathed miraculously in a flood of light, in which grasshoppers fiddled triumphantly their joy in life. The sources of his dreams discovered themselves in the bawl of thirsty cattle and the regular clicking of a windmill.

A glance at his watch told him that it was six o'clock.

"Time to get up, Steve," he told himself, and forthwith did.

He chose a rough crash towel, slipped on a pair of Howard's moccasins, and went down to the river through an ambient that had the sparkle and exhilaration of champagne. The mountain air was still finely crisp with the frost, in spite of the sun warmth that was beginning to mellow it. Flinging aside the Indian blanket he had caught up before

leaving the cabin, he stood for an instant on the bank, a human being with the physical poise, compactness, and lithe-muscled smoothness of a tiger.

Even as he plunged a rifle cracked. While he dived through the air, before the shock of the icy water tingled through him, he was planning his escape. The opposite bank rose ten feet above the stream. He kept under the water until he came close to this, then swam swiftly along it with only his head showing, so as to keep him out of sight as much as possible.

Half a stone's throw farther the bank fell again to the water's edge, the river having broadened and grown shallow, as mountain creeks do. The ranger ran, stooping, along the bank, till it afforded him no more protection, then dashed across the stony-bottomed stream to the shelter of the thick aspens beyond.

Just as he expected, a shot rang from far up the mountainside. In another instant he was safe in the foliage of the young aspens.

In the sheer exhilaration of his escape he laughed aloud.

"Last show to score gone, Mr. Struve. I figured it just right. He waited too long for his first shot. Then the bank hid me. He wasn't expecting to see me away down the stream, so he hadn't time to sight his second one."

Steve wound his way in and out among the aspens, working toward the tail of them, which ran

up the hill a little way and dropped down almost to the back door of the cabin. Upon this he was presently pounding.

Howard let him in. He had a revolver in his hand, the first weapon he could snatch up.

"You durned old idiot! It's a wonder you ain't dead three ways for Sunday," he shouted joyfully at sight of him. "Ain't I told you 'steen times to do what bathin' you got to do, right here in the shack?"

The Texan laughed again. Naked as that of Father Adam, his splendid body was glowing with the bath and the exercise.

"He's ce'tainly the worst chump ever, Alec. Had me in sight all the way down to the creek, but waited till I wasn't moving. Reckon he was nervous. Anyhow, he waited just one-tenth of a second too late. Shot just as I leaned forward for my dive. He gave me a free hair-cut though."

A swath showed where the bullet had mowed a furrow of hair so close that in one place it had slightly torn the scalp.

"He shot again, didn't he?"

"Yep. I swam along the far bank, so that he couldn't get at me, and crossed into the aspens. He got another chance as I was crossing, but he had to take it on the fly, and missed."

The cattleman surveyed the hillside cautiously through the front window. "I reckon he's pulled his freight, most likely. But we'll stay cooped for

a while, on the chance. You're the luckiest cuss I ever did see. More lives than a cat."

Howard laid his revolver down within reach, and proceeded to light a fire in the stove, from which rose presently the pleasant odors of aromatic coffee and fried ham and eggs.

"Come and get it, Steve," said Howard, by way of announcing breakfast. "No, you don't. I'll take the window seat, and at that we'll have the curtain drawn."

They were just finishing breakfast when Siegfried cantered up.

"You bane ready, Steve?" he called in.

Howard appeared in the doorway. "Say, Sig, go down to the corral and saddle up Teddy for Steve, will you? Some of his friends have been potshotting at him again. No damage done, except to my feelings, but there's nothing like being careful."

Siegfried's face darkened. "Ay bane like for know who it vas?"

Howard laughed. "Now, if you'll tell Steve that he'll give you as much as six bits, Sig. He's got notions, but they ain't worth any more than yours or mine. Say, where you boys going to-day? I've a notion to go along."

"Oh, just out for a little *pasear,*" Steve answered casually. "Thought you were going to work on your south fence to-day."

"Well, I reckon I better. It sure needs fixing.

You lads take good care of yourselves. I don't need to tell you not to pass anywhere near the run, Sig," he grinned, with the manner of one giving a superfluous warning.

Fraser looked at Siegfried, with a smile in his eyes. "No, we'll not *pass* the run to-day, Alec."

A quarter of an hour later they were in the saddle and away. Siegfried did not lead his friend directly up the cañon that opened into Jack Rabbit Run, but across the hills to a pass, which had to be taken on foot. They left the horses picketed on a grassy slope, and climbed the faint trail that went steeply up the bowlder-strewn mountain.

The ascent was so steep that the last bit had to be done on all fours. It was a rock face, though by no means an impossible one, since projecting ledges and knobs offered a foothold all the way. From the summit, the trail edged its way down so precipitously that twice fallen pines had to be used as ladders for the descent.

As soon as they were off the rocks, the big blonde gave the signal for silence. "Ay bane t'ink we might meet up weeth some one," he whispered, and urged Steve to follow him as closely as possible.

It was half an hour later that Sig pointed out a small clearing ahead of them. "Cabin's right oop on the edge of the aspens. See it?"

The ranger nodded assent.

"Ay bane go down first an' see how t'ings look."

When the Norwegian entered the cabin, he saw

two men seated at a table, playing seven up. The one facing him was Tommie, the cook; the other was an awkward heavy-set fellow, whom he knew for the man he wanted, even before the scarred, villainous face was twisted toward him.

Struve leaped instantly to his feet, overturning his chair in his haste. He had not met the big Norseman since the night he had attempted to hang Fraser.

"Ay bane not shoot yuh now," Siegfried told him.

"Right sure of that, are you?" the convict snarled, his hand on his weapon. "If you've got any doubts, now's the time to air them, and we'll settle this thing right now."

"Ay bane not shoot, Ay tell you."

Tommie, who had ducked beneath the table at the prospect of trouble, now cautiously emerged.

"I ain't lost any pills from either of your guns, gents," he explained, with a face so laughably and frankly frightened that both of the others smiled.

"Have a drink, Siegfried," suggested Struve, by way of sealing the treaty. "Tommie, get out that bottle."

"Ay bane t'ink Ay look tc my horse first," the Norwegian answered, and immediately left by way of the back door not three minutes before Jed Briscoe entered by the front one.

Jed shut the door behind him and looked at the convict.

"Well?" he demanded.

Struve faced him sullenly, without answering.

"Tommie, *vamos*," hinted Briscoe gently, and as soon as the cook had disappeared, he repeated his monosyllable: "Well?"

'It didn't come off," muttered the other sulkily.

"Just what I expected. Why not?"

Struve broke into a string of furious oaths. "Because I missed him—missed him twice, when he was standing there naked before me. He was coming down to the creek to take a bath, and I waited till he was close. I had a sure bead on him, and he dived just as I fired. I got another chance, when he was running across, farther down, and, by thunder, I missed again."

Jed laughed, and the sound of it was sinister.

"Couldn't hit the side of a house, could you? You're nothing but a cheap skate, a tin-horn gambler, run down at the heels. All right. I'm through with you. Lieutenant Fraser, from Texas, can come along and collect whenever he likes. I'll not protect a false alarm like you any longer."

Struve looked at him, as a cornered wolf might have done. "What will you do?"

"I'll give you up to him. I'll tell him to come in and get you. I'll show him the way in, you white-livered cur!" bullied the cattleman, giving way to one of his rages.

"You'd better not," snarled the convict. "Not if you want to live."

As they stood facing each other in a panting fury the door opened, to let in Siegfried and the ranger

Jed's rage against Struve died on the spot. He saw his enemy, the ranger, before him, and leaped to the conclusion that he had come to this hidden retreat to run him down for the Squaw Creek murders. Instantly, his hand swept to the hilt of his revolver.

That motion sealed his doom. For Struve knew that Siegfried had brought the ranger to capture him, and suspected in the same flash that Briscoe was in on the betrayal. Had not the man as good as told him so, not thirty seconds before? He supposed that Jed was drawing to kill or cover him, and, like a flash of lightning, unscabbarded and fired.

"You infernal Judas, I'll get you anyhow," he cried.

Jed dropped his weapon, and reeled back against the wall, where he hung for a moment, while the convict pumped a second and a third bullet into his body. Briscoe was dead before Fraser could leap forward and throw his arms round the man who had killed him.

Between them, they flung Struve to the ground, and disarmed him. The convict's head had struck as he went down, and it was not for some little time that he recovered fully from his daze. When he did his hands were tied behind him.

"I didn't go for to kill him," he whimpered, now

thoroughly frightened at what he had done. "You both saw it, gentlemen. You did, lieutenant. So did you, Sig. It was self-defense. He drew on me. I didn't go to do it."

Fraser was examining the dead man's wounds. He looked up, and said to his friend: "Nothing to do for him, Sig. He's gone."

"I tell you, I didn't mean to do it," pleaded Struve. "Why, lieutenant, that man has been trying to get me to ambush you for weeks. I'll swear it." The convict was in a panic of terror, ready to curry favor with the man whom he held his deadliest enemy. "Yes, lieutenant, ever since you came here. He's been egging me on to kill you."

"And you tried it three times?"

"No, sir." He pointed vindictively at the dead man, lying face up on the floor. "It was him that ambushed you this morning. I hadn't a thing to do with it."

"Don't lie, you coward."

They carried the body to the next room and put it on a bed. Tommie was dispatched on a fast horse for help.

Late in the afternoon he brought back with him Doctor Lee, and half an hour after sunset Yorky and Slim galloped up. They were for settling the matter out of hand by stringing the convict Struve up to the nearest pine, but they found the ranger so very much on the spot that they reconsidered.

"He's my prisoner, gentlemen. I came in here and took him—that is, with the help of my friend Siegfried. I reckon if you mill it over a spell, you'll find you don't want him half as bad as we do," he said mildly.

"What's the matter with all of us going in on this thing, lieutenant?" proposed Yorky.

"I never did see such a fellow for necktie parties as you are, Yorky. Not three weeks ago, you was invitin' me to be chief mourner at one of your little affairs, and your friend Johnson was to be master of ceremonies. Now you've got the parts reversed. No, I reckon we'll have to disappoint you this trip."

"What are you going to do with him?" asked Yorky, with plain dissatisfaction.

"I'm going to take him down to Gimlet Butte. Arizona and Wyoming and Texas will have to scrap it out for him there."

"*When* you get him there," Yorky said significantly.

"Yes, when I get him there," answered the Texan blandly, carefully oblivious of the other's implication.

The moon was beginning to show itself over a hill before the Texan and Siegfried took the road with their captive. Fraser had carelessly let drop a remark to the effect that they would spend the night at the Dillon ranch.

His watch showed eleven o'clock before they

reached the ranch, but he pushed on without turning in and did not stop until they came to the Howard place.

They roused Alec from sleep, and he cooked them a post-midnight supper, after which he saddled his cow pony, buckled on his belt, and took down his old rifle from the rack.

"I'll jog along with you lads and see the fun," he said.

Their prisoner had not eaten. The best he could do was to gulp down some coffee, for he was in a nervous chill of apprehension. Every gust of wind seemed to carry to him the patter of pursuit. The hooting of an owl sent a tremor through him.

"Don't you reckon we had better hurry?" he had asked with dry lips more than once, while the others were eating.

He asked it again as they were setting off.

Howard looked him over with rising disgust, without answering. Presently, he remarked, apropos of nothing: "Are all your Texas wolves coyotes, Steve?"

He would have liked to know at least that it was a man whose life he was protecting, even though the fellow was also a villain. But this crumb of satisfaction was denied him.

CHAPTER XVII

ON THE ROAD TO GIMLET BUTTE

"We'll go out by the river way," said Howard tentatively. "Eh, what think, Sig? It's longer, but Yorky will be expecting us to take the short cut over the pass."

The Norwegian agreed. "It bane von chance, anyhow."

By unfrequented trails they traversed the valley till they reached the cañon down which poured Squaw Creek on its way to the outside world. A road ran alongside this for a mile or two, but disappeared into the stream when the gulch narrowed. The first faint streaks of gray dawn were lightening the sky enough for Fraser to see this. He was riding in advance, and commented upon it to Siegfried, who rode with him.

The Norwegian laughed. "Ay bane t'ink we do some wadin'."

They swung off to the right, and a little later splashed through the water for a few minutes and came out into a spreading valley beyond the sheer walls of the retreat they had left. Taking the road

again, they traveled faster than they had been able to do before.

"Who left the valley yesterday for Gimlet Butte, Sig?" Howard asked, after it was light enough to see. "I notice tracks of two horses."

"Ay bane vondering. Ay t'ink mebbe West over——"

"I reckon not. This ain't the track of his big bay. Must 'a' been yesterday, too, because it rained the night before."

For some hours they could see occasionally the tracks of the two horses, but eventually lost them where two trails forked.

"Taking the Sweetwater cutoff to the Butte, I reckon," Howard surmised.

They traveled all day, except for a stop about ten o'clock for breakfast, and another late in the afternoon, to rest the horses. At night, they put up at a ranch house, and were in the saddle again early in the morning. Before noon, they struck a telephone line, and Fraser called up Brandt at a ranch.

"Hello! This Sheriff Brandt? Lieutenant Fraser, of the Texas Rangers, is talking. I'm on my way to town with a prisoner. We're at Christy's, now. There will, perhaps, be an attempt to take him from us. I'll explain the circumstances later. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . We can hold him, I think, but there may be trouble. . . . Yes, that's it. We have no legal right to detain him, I suppose. . . . That's what I was going

to suggest. Better send about four men to meet us. We'll come in on the Blasted Pine road. . . . About nine to-night, I should think."

As they rode easily along the dusty road, the Texan explained his plan to his friends.

"We don't want any trouble with Yorky's crowd. We ain't any of us deputies, and my commission doesn't run in Wyoming, of course. My notion is to lie low in the hills two or three hours this afternoon, and give Brandt a chance to send his men out to meet us. The responsibility will be on them, and we can be sworn in as deputies, too."

They rested in a grassy draw, about fifteen miles from town, and took the trail again shortly after dark. It was an hour later that Fraser, who had an extraordinary quick ear, heard the sound of men riding toward them. He drew his party quickly into the shadows of the hills, a little distance from the road.

They could hear voices of the advancing party, and presently could make out words.

"I tell you, they've *got* to come in on this road, Slim," one of the men was saying dogmatically. "We're bound to meet up with them. That's all there is to it."

"Yorky," whispered Howard, in the ranger's ear.

They rode past in pairs, six of them in all. As chance would have it, Siegfried's pony, perhaps recognizing a friend among those passing, nickered

shrilly its greeting. Instantly, the riders drew up.

"Where did that come from?" Yorky asked, in a low voice.

"From over to the right. I see men there now. See! Up against that hill." Slim pointed toward the group in the shadow.

Yorky hailed them. "That you, Sig?"

"Yuh bane von good guesser," answered the Norwegian.

"How many of you are there?"

"Four, Yorky," Fraser replied.

"There are six of us. We've got you outnumbered, boys."

Very faintly there came to the lieutenant the beat of horses' feet. He sparred for time.

"What do you want, Yorky?"

"You know what we want. That murderer you've got there—that's what we want."

"We're taking him in to be tried, Yorky. Justice will be done to him."

"Not at Gimlet Butte it won't. No jury will convict him for killing Jed Briscoe, from Lost Valley. We're going to hang him, right now."

"You'll have to fight for him, my friend, and before you do that I want you to understand the facts."

"We understand all the facts we need to, right now."

The lieutenant rode forward alone. He knew

that soon they too would hear the rhythmic beat of the advancing posse.

"We've got all night to settle this, boys. Let's do what is fair and square. That's all I ask."

"Now you're shouting, lieutenant. That's all we ask."

"It depends on what you mean by fair and square," another one spoke up.

The ranger nodded amiably at him. "That you, Harris? Well, let's look at the facts right. Here's Lost Valley, that's had a bad name ever since it was inhabited. Far as I can make out its settlers are honest men, regarded outside as miscreants. Just as folks were beginning to forget it, comes the Squaw Creek raid. Now, I'm not going into that, and I'm not going to say a word against the man that lies dead up in the hills. But I'll say this: His death solves a problem for a good many of the boys up there. I'm going to make it my business to see that the facts are known right down in Gimlet Butte. I'm going to lift the blame from the boys that were present, and couldn't help what happened."

Yorky was impressed, but suspicion was not yet banished from his mind. "You seem to know a lot about it, lieutenant."

"No use discussing that, Yorky. I know what I know. Here's the great big point: If you lynch the man that shot Jed, the word will go out that the valley is still a nest of lawless outlaws. The story

will be that the Squaw Creeek raiders and their friends did it. Just as the situation is clearing up nicely, you'll make it a hundred times worse by seeming to indorse what Jed did on Squaw Creek."

"By thunder, that's right," Harris blurted.

Fraser spoke again. "Listen, boys. Do you hear horses galloping? That is Sheriff Brandt's deputies, coming to our assistance. You've lost the game, but you can save your faces yet. Join us, and help escort the prisoner to town. Nobody need know why you came out. We'll put it that it was to guard against a lynching."

The men looked at each other sheepishly. They had been outwitted, and in their hearts were glad of it. Harris turned to the ranger with a laugh. "You're a good one, Fraser. Kept us here talking, while your reënforcements came up. Well, boys, I reckon we better join the Sunday-school class."

So it happened that when Sheriff Brandt and his men came up they found the mountain folk united. He was surprised at the size of the force with the Texan.

"You're certainly of a cautious disposition, lieutenant. With eight men to help you, I shouldn't have figured you needed my posse," he remarked.

"It gives you the credit of bringing in the prisoner, sheriff," Steve told him unblushingly, voicing the first explanation that came to his mind.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WITNESS IN REBUTTAL

Two hours later, Lieutenant Fraser was closeted with Brandt and Hilliard. He told them his story —or as much of it as he deemed necessary. The prosecuting attorney heard him to an end before he gave a short, skeptical laugh.

"It doesn't seem to me you've quite lived up to your reputation, lieutenant," he commented.

"I wasn't trying to," retorted Steve.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I have told you how I got into the valley. I couldn't go in there and betray my friends."

Hilliard wagged his fat forefinger. "How about betraying our trust? How about throwing us down? We let you escape, after you had given us your word to do this job, didn't we?"

"Yes. I had to throw you down. There wasn't any other way."

"You tell a pretty fishy story, lieutenant. It doesn't stand to reason that one man did all the mischief on that Squaw Creek raid."

"It is true. Not a shadow of a doubt of it. I'll

bring you three witnesses, if you'll agree to hold them guiltless."

"And I suppose I'm to agree to hold you guiltless of Faulkner's death, too?" the lawyer demanded.

"I didn't say that. I'm here, Mr. Hilliard, to deliver my person, because I can't stand by the terms of our agreement. I think I've been fair with you."

Hilliard looked at Brandt, with twinkling eyes. It struck Fraser that they had between them some joke in which he was not a sharer.

"You're willing to assume full responsibility for the death of Faulkner, are you? Ready to plead guilty, eh?"

Fraser laughed. "Just a moment. I didn't say that. What I said was that I'm here to stand my trial. It's up to you to prove me guilty."

"But, in point of fact, you practically admit it."

"In point of fact, I would prefer not to say so. Prove it, if you can."

"I have witnesses here, ready to swear to the truth, lieutenant."

"Aren't your witnesses prejudiced a little?"

"Maybe." The smile on Hilliard's fat face broadened. "Two of them are right here. Suppose we find out."

He stepped to the door of the inner office, and opened it. From the room emerged Dillon and

his daughter. The Texan looked at Arlie in blank amazement.

"This young lady says she was present, lieutenant, and knows who fired the shot that killed Faulkner."

The ranger saw only Arlie. His gaze was full of deep reproach. "You came down here to save me," he said, in the manner of one stating a fact.

"Why shouldn't I? Ought I to have let you suffer for me? Did you think I was so base?"

"You oughtn't to have done it. You have brought trouble on yourself."

Her eyes glowed with deep fires. "I don't care. I have done what was right. Did you think dad and I would sit still and let you pay forfeit for us?"

The lieutenant's spirits rejoiced at the thing she had done, but his mind could not forget what she must go through.

"I'm glad and I'm sorry," he said simply.

Hilliard came, smiling, to relieve the situation. "I've got a piece of good news for both of you. Two of the boys that were in that shooting scrap three miles from town came to my office the other day and admitted that they attacked you. It got noised around that there was a girl in it, and they were anxious to have the thing dropped. I don't think either of you need worry about it any more."

Dillon gave a shout. "Glory, hallelujah!" He had been much troubled, and his relief shone on

his face. "I say, gentlemen, that's the best news I've heard in twenty years. Let's go celebrate it with just one."

Brandt and Hilliard joined him, but the Texan lingered.

"I reckon I'll join you later, gentlemen," he said.

While their footsteps died away he looked steadily at Arlie. Her eyes met his and held fast. Beneath the olive of her cheeks, a color began to glow.

He held out both his hands. The light in his eyes softened, transfigured his hard face. "You can't help it, honey. It may not be what you would have chosen, but it has got to be. You're mine."

Almost beneath her breath she spoke. "You forgot—the other girl."

"What other girl? There is none—never was one."

"The girl in the picture."

His eyes opened wide. "Good gracious! She's been married three months to a friend of mine. Larry Neill his name is."

"And she isn't your sweetheart at all? Never was?"

"I don't reckon she ever was. Neill took that picture himself. We were laughing, because I had just been guying them about how quick they got engaged. She was saying I'd be engaged myself before six months. And I am. Ain't I?"

She came to him slowly—first, the little outstretched hands, and then the soft, supple, resilient

body. Slowly, too, her sweet reluctant lips came round to meet his.

"Yes, Steve, I'm yours. I think I always have been, even before I knew you."

"Even when you hated me?" he asked presently.

"Most of all, when I hated you." She laughed happily. "That was just another way of love."

"We'll have fifty years to find out all the different ways," the man promised.

"Fifty years. Oh, Steve!"

She gave a happy little sigh, and nestled closer.

OH, YOU TEX!

TO

SAM F. DUNN

OF AMARILLO, TEXAS

INSPECTOR OF CATTLE IN THE DAYS

OF THE LONGHORN DRIVES

TO WHOSE EXPERIENCE AND GENEROUS CRITICISM

I AM INDEBTED FOR AID IN THE

PREPARATION OF THIS BOOK

CONTENTS

I. The Line-Rider 3
II. "I'll be Seventeen, coming Grass" . . 12
III. Tex takes an Interest 18
IV. Tex Grandstands 26
V. Captain Ellison hires a Hand . . . 38
VI. Clint Wadley's Messenger 44
VII. The Dance 54
VIII. Rutherford makes a Mistake 62
IX. Murder in the Chaparral 69
X. "A Damned Poor Apology for a Man" . 75
XI. One to Four 79
XII. Tex rearranges the Seating 89
XIII. "Only One Mob, ain't there?" . . . 99
XIV. Jack serves Notice 108
XV. A Close Shave 113
XVI. Wadley goes Home in a Buckboard . . 122
XVII. Old-Timers 132
XVIII. A Shot out of the Night 138
XIX. Trapped 146
XX. Kiowas on the Warpath 155
XXI. Tex takes a Long Walk 166
XXII. The Test 174
XXIII. A Shy Young Man dines 179
XXIV. Tex borrows a Blacksnake 184
XXV. "They're runnin' me outa Town" . . 191

XXVI. For Professional Services . . . 199
XXVII. Clint frees his Mind 203
XXVIII. On a Cold Trail 211
XXIX. Burnt Brands 219
XXX. Rogues disagree 226
XXXI. A Pair of Deuces 237
XXXII. The Hold-Up 245
XXXIII. The Man with the Yellow Streak . 251
XXXIV. Ramona goes Duck-Hunting . . . 258
XXXV. The Desert 266
XXXVI. Homer Dinsmore escorts Ramona . . 272
XXXVII. On a Hot Trail 279
XXXVIII. Dinsmore to the Rescue 287
XXXIX. A Cry out of the Night 292
XL. Gurley's Get-Away 296
XLI. Homing Hearts 302
XLII. A Difference of Opinion 310
XLIII. Tex resigns 319
XLIV. Dinsmore gives Information . . . 328
XLV. Ramona deserts her Father . . . 332
XLVI. Loose Threads 338

OH, YOU TEX!

CHAPTER I

THE LINE-RIDER

DAY was breaking in the Panhandle. The line-rider finished his breakfast of buffalo-hump, coffee, and biscuits. He had eaten heartily, for it would be long after sunset before he touched food again.

Cheerfully and tunelessly he warbled a cowboy ditty as he packed his supplies and prepared to go.

> "Oh, it's bacon and beans most every day,
> I'd as lief be eatin' prairie hay."

While he washed his dishes in the fine sand and rinsed them in the current of the creek he announced jocundly to a young world glad with spring:

> "I'll sell my outfit soon as I can,
> Won't punch cattle for no damn' man."

The tin cup beat time against the tin plate to accompany a kind of shuffling dance. Jack Roberts was fifty miles from nowhere, alone on the desert, but the warm blood of youth set his feet to moving. Why should he not dance? He was one and twenty, stood five feet eleven in his

socks, and weighed one hundred and seventy pounds of bone, sinew, and well-packed muscle. A son of blue skies and wide, wind-swept spaces, he had never been ill in his life. Wherefore the sun-kissed world looked good to him.

He mounted a horse picketed near the camp and rode out to a *remuda* of seven cow-ponies grazing in a draw. Of these he roped one and brought it back to camp, where he saddled it with deft swiftness.

The line-rider swung to the saddle and put his pony at a jog-trot. He topped a hill and looked across the sunlit mesas which rolled in long swells far as the eye could see. The desert flowered gayly with the purple, pink, and scarlet blossoms of the cacti and with the white, lilylike buds of the Spanish bayonet. The yucca and the prickly pear were abloom. He swept the panorama with trained eyes. In the distance a little bunch of antelope was moving down to water in single file. On a slope two miles away grazed a small herd of buffalo. No sign of human habitation was written on that vast solitude of space.

The cowboy swung to the south and held a steady road gait. With an almost uncanny accuracy he recognized all signs that had to do with cattle. Though cows, half hidden in the brush, melted into the color of the hillside, he picked them out unerringly. Brands, at a distance so

great that a tenderfoot could have made of them only a blur, were plain as a primer to him.

Cows that carried on their flanks the A T O, he turned and started northward. As he returned, he would gather up these strays and drive them back to their own range. For in those days, before the barbed wire had reached Texas and crisscrossed it with boundary lines, the cowboy was a fence more mobile than the wandering stock.

It was past noon when Roberts dropped into a draw where an immense man was lying sprawled under a bush. The recumbent man was a mountain of flesh; how he ever climbed to a saddle was a miracle; how a little cow-pony carried him was another. Yet there was no better line-rider in the Panhandle than Jumbo Wilkins.

"'Lo, Texas," the fat man greeted.

The young line-rider had won the nickname of "Texas" in New Mexico a year or two before by his aggressive championship of his native State. Somehow the sobriquet had clung to him even after his return to the Panhandle.

"'Lo, Jumbo," returned the other. "How?"

"Fat like a match. I'm sure losin' flesh. Took up another notch in my belt yestiddy."

Roberts shifted in the saddle, resting his weight on the horn and the ball of one foot for ease. He was a slim, brown youth, hard as nails and tough as whipcord. His eyes were quick and

wary. In spite of the imps of mischief that just now lighted them, one got an impression of strength. He might or might not be, in the phrase of the country, a "bad *hombre*," but it was safe to say he was an efficient one.

"Quick consumption, sure," pronounced the younger man promptly. "You don't look to me like you weigh an ounce over three hundred an' fifty pounds. Appetite kind o' gone?"

"You're damn whistlin'. I got an ailment, I tell you, Tex. This mo'nin' I did n't eat but a few slices of bacon an' some li'l' steaks an' a pan or two o' flapjacks an' mebbe nine or ten biscuits. Afterward I felt kind o' bloated like. I need some sa'saparilla. Now, if I could make out to get off for a few days - -"

"You could get that sarsaparilla across the bar at the Bird Cage, could n't you, Jumbo?" the boy grinned.

The whale of a man looked at him reproachfully. "You never seen me shootin' up no towns or raisin' hell when I was lit up. I can take a drink or leave it alone."

"That's right too. Nobody lets it alone more than you do when it can't be got. I've noticed that."

"You cayn't devil me, boy. I was punchin' longhorns when yore mammy was paddlin' you for stealin' the sugar. Say, that reminds me. I'm plumb out o' sugar. Can you loan me some til'

Pedro gits around? I got to have sugar or I begin to fall off right away," the big man whined.

The line-riders chatted casually of the topics that interest men in the land of wide, empty frontiers. Of Indians they had something to say, of their diminishing grub supply more. Jumbo mentioned that he had found an A T O cow dead by a water-hole. They spoke incidentally of the Dinsmore gang, a band of rustlers operating in No Man's Land. They had little news of people, since neither of them had for three weeks seen another human being except Quint Sullivan, the line-rider who fenced the A T O cattle to the east of Roberts.

Presently Roberts nodded a good-bye and passed again into the solitude of empty spaces. The land-waves swallowed him. Once more he followed draws, crossed washes, climbed cow-backed hills, picking up drift-cattle as he rode.

It was late afternoon when he saw a thin spiral of smoke from a rise of ground. Smoke meant that some human being was abroad in the land, and every man on the range called for investigation. The rider moved forward to reconnoiter.

He saw a man, a horse, a cow, a calf, and a fire. When these five things came together, it meant that somebody was branding. The present business of Roberts was to find out what brand was on the cow and what one was being run on the flank of the calf. He rode forward at a slow canter.

The man beside the fire straightened. He took off his hat and swept it in front of him in a semicircle from left to right. The line-rider understood the sign language of the plains. He was being "waved around." The man was serving notice upon him to pass in a wide circle. It meant that the dismounted man did not intend to let himself be recognized. The easy deduction was that he was a rustler.

The cowboy rode steadily forward. The man beside the fire picked up a rifle lying at his feet and dropped a bullet a few yards in front of the advancing man.

Roberts drew to a halt. He was armed with a six-shooter, but a revolver was of no use at this distance. For a moment he hesitated. Another bullet lifted a spurt of dust almost at his horse's feet.

The line-rider waited for no more definite warning. He waved a hand toward the rustler and shouted down the wind: "Some other day." Quickly he swung his horse to the left and vanished into an arroyo. Then, without an instant's loss of time, he put his pony swiftly up the draw toward a "rim-rock" edging a mesa. Over to the right was Box Cañon, which led to the rough lands of a terrain unknown to Roberts. It was a three-to-one chance that the rustler would disappear into the cañon.

The young man rode fast, putting his bronco

at the hills with a rush. He was in a treeless country, covered with polecat brush. Through this he plunged recklessly, taking breaks in the ground without slackening speed in the least.

Near the summit of the rise Roberts swung from the saddle and ran forward through the brush, crouching as he moved. With a minimum of noise and a maximum of speed he negotiated the thick shrubbery and reached the gorge.

He crept forward cautiously and looked down. Through the shin-oak which grew thick on the edge of the bluff he made out a man on horseback driving a calf. The mount was a sorrel with white stockings and a splash of white on the nose. The distance was too great for Roberts to make out the features of the rider clearly, though he could see the fellow was dark and slender.

The line-rider watched him out of sight, then slithered down the face of the bluff to the sandy wash. He knelt down and studied intently the hoofprints written in the soil. They told him that the left hind hoof of the animal was broken in an odd way.

Jack Roberts clambered up the steep edge of the gulch and returned to the cow-pony waiting for him with drooping hip and sleepy eyes.

"Oh, you Two Bits, we'll amble along and see where our friend is headin' for."

He picked a way down into the cañon and followed the rustler. At the head of the gulch the

man on the sorrel had turned to the left. The cowboy turned also in that direction. A sign by the side of the trail confronted him.

THIS IS PETE DINSMORE'S ROAD —
TAKE ANOTHER

"The plot sure thickens," grinned Jack. "Reckon I won't take Pete's advice to-day. It don't listen good."

He spoke aloud, to himself or to his horse or to the empty world at large, as lonely riders often do on the plains or in the hills, but from the heavens above an answer dropped down to him in a heavy, masterful voice:

"Git back along that trail *pronto!*"

Roberts looked up. A flat rock topped the bluff above. From the edge of it the barrel of a rifle projected. Behind it was a face masked by a bandana handkerchief. The combination was a sinister one.

If the line-rider was dismayed or even surprised, he gave no evidence of it.

"Just as you say, stranger. I reckon you're callin' this dance," he admitted.

"You'll be lucky if you don't die of lead-poisonin' inside o' five minutes. No funny business! Git!"

The cowboy got. He whirled his pony in its tracks and sent it jogging down the back trail. A tenderfoot would have taken the gulch at break-

neck speed. Most old-timers would have found a canter none too fast. But Jack Roberts held to a steady road gait. Not once did he look back—but every foot of the way till he had turned a bend in the cañon there was an ache in the small of his back. It was a purely sympathetic sensation, for at any moment a bullet might come crashing between the shoulders.

Once safely out of range the rider mopped a perspiring face.

"Wow! This is your lucky day, Jack. Ain't you got better sense than to trail rustlers with no weapon but a Sunday-School text? Well, here's hopin'! Maybe we'll meet again in the sweet by an' by. You never can always tell."

CHAPTER II

"I'LL BE SEVENTEEN, COMING GRASS"

THE camper looked up from the antelope steak he was frying, to watch a man cross the shallow creek. In the clear morning light of the Southwest his eyes had picked the rider out of the surrounding landscape nearly an hour before. For at least one fourth of the time since this discovery he had been aware that his approaching visitor was Pedro Menendez, of the A T O ranch.

"Better 'light, son," suggested Roberts.

The Mexican flashed a white-toothed smile at the sizzling steak, took one whiff of the coffee and slid from the saddle. Eating was one of the things that Pedro did best.

"The ol' man — he sen' me," the boy explained. "He wan' you at the ranch."

Further explanation waited till the edge of Pedro's appetite was blunted. The line-rider lighted a cigarette and casually asked a question.

"Whyfor does he want me?"

It developed that the Mexican had been sent to relieve Roberts because the latter was needed to take charge of a trail herd. Not by the flicker of an eyelash did the line-rider show that this news meant anything to him. It was promotion — better pay, a better chance for advancement,

an easier life. But Jack Roberts had learned to take good and ill fortune with the impassive face of a gambler.

"Keep an eye out for rustlers, Pedro," he advised before he left. "You want to watch Box Cañon. Unless I'm 'way off, the Dinsmore gang are operatin' through it. I 'most caught one red-handed the other day. Lucky for me I did n't. You an' Jumbo would 'a' had to bury me out on the lone prairee."

Nearly ten hours later Jack Roberts dismounted in front of the whitewashed adobe house that was the headquarters of the A T O ranch. On the porch an old cattleman sat slouched in a chair tilted back against the wall, a rundown heel of his boot hitched in the rung. The wrinkled coat he wore hung on him like a sack, and one leg of his trousers had caught at the top of the high boot. The owner of the A T O was a heavy-set, powerful man in the early fifties. Just now he was smoking a corncob pipe.

The keen eyes of the cattleman watched lazily the young line-rider come up the walk. Most cowboys walked badly; on horseback they might be kings of the earth, but out of the saddle they rolled like sailors. Clint Wadley noticed that the legs of this young fellow were straight and that he trod the ground lightly as a buck in mating-season.

"He'll make a hand," was Wadley's verdict,

one he had arrived at after nearly a year of shrewd observation.

But no evidence of satisfaction in his employee showed itself in the greeting of the "old man." He grunted what might pass for "Howdy!" if one were an optimist.

Roberts explained his presence by saying: "You sent for me, Mr. Wadley."

"H'm! That durned fool York done bust his laig. Think you can take a herd up the trail to Tascosa?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's the way all you brash young colts talk. But how many of 'em will you lose on the way? How sorry will they look when you deliver the herd? That's what I'd like to know."

Jack Roberts was paying no attention to the grumbling of his boss — for a young girl had come out of the house. She was a slim little thing, with a slender throat that carried the small head like the stem of a rose. Dark, long-lashed eyes, eager and bubbling with laughter, were fixed on Wadley. She had slipped out on tiptoe to surprise him. Her soft fingers covered his eyes.

"Guess who!" she ordered.

"Quit yore foolishness," growled the cattleman. "Don't you-all see I'm talkin' business?" But the line-rider observed that his arm encircled the waist of the girl.

With a flash of shy eyes the girl caught sight

of Roberts, who had been half hidden from her behind the honeysuckle foliage.

"Oh! I did n't know," she cried.

The owner of the A T O introduced them. "This is Jack Roberts, one of my trail foremen. Roberts — my daughter Ramona. I reckon you can see for yoreself she's plumb spoiled."

A soft laugh welled from the throat of the girl. She knew that for her at least her father was all bark and no bite.

"It's you that is spoiled, Dad," she said in the slow, sweet voice of the South. "I've been away too long, but now I'm back I mean to bring you up right. Now I'll leave you to your business."

The eyes of the girl rested for a moment on those of the line-rider as she nodded good-bye. Jack had never before seen Ramona Wadley, nor for that matter had he seen her brother Rutherford. Since he had been in the neighborhood, both of them had been a good deal of the time in Tennessee at school, and Jack did not come to the ranch-house once in three months. It was hard to believe that this dainty child was the daughter of such a battered hulk as Clint Wadley. He was what the wind and the sun and the tough Southwest had made him. And she — she was a daughter of the morning.

But Wadley did not release Ramona. "Since you're here you might as well go through with it," he said. "What do you want?"

"What does a woman always want?" she asked sweetly, and then answered her own question. "Clothes — and money to buy them — lots of it. I'm going to town to-morrow, you know."

"H'm!" His grunt was half a chuckle, half a growl. "Do you call yoreself a woman — a little bit of a trick like you? Why, I could break you in two."

She drew herself up very straight. "I'll be seventeen, coming grass. And it's much more likely, sir, that I'll break you — as you'll find out when the bills come in after I've been to town."

With that she swung on her heel and vanished inside the house.

The proud, fond eyes of the cattleman followed her. It was an easy guess that she was the apple of his eye.

But when he turned to business again his manner was gruffer than usual. He was a trifle crisper to balance the effect of his new foreman having discovered that he was as putty in the hands of this slip of a girl.

"Well, you know where you're at, Roberts. Deliver that herd without any loss for strays, fat, an' in good condition, an' you won't need to go back to line-ridin'. Fall down on the job, an' you'll never get another chance to drive **A T O** cows."

"That's all I ask, Mr. Wadley," the cowboy answered. "An' much obliged for the chance."

"Don't thank me. Thank York's busted laig," snapped his chief. "We'll make the gather for the drive to-morrow an' Friday."

CHAPTER III

TEX TAKES AN INTEREST

JACK ROBERTS was in two minds whether to stop at the Longhorn saloon. He needed a cook in his trail outfit, and the most likely employment agency in Texas during that decade was the bar-room of a gambling-house. Every man out of a job naturally drifted to the only place of entertainment.

The wandering eye of the foreman decided the matter for him. It fell upon a horse, and instantly ceased to rove. The cow-pony was tied to a hitching-rack worn shiny by thousands of reins. On the nose of the bronco was a splash of white. Stockings of the same color marked its legs. The left hind hoof was gashed and broken.

The rider communed with himself. "I reckon we'll 'light and take an interest, Jack. Them that looks for, finds."

He slid from the saddle and rolled a cigarette, after which he made friends with the sorrel and examined carefully the damaged foot.

"It's a li'l' bit of a world after all," he commented. "You never can tell who you're liable to meet up with." The foreman drew from its scabbard a revolver and slid it back into place to make sure that it lay easy in its case. "You can't

guess for sure what's likely to happen. I'd a heap rather be too cautious than have flowers sent me."

He sauntered through the open door into the gambling-house. It was a large hall, in the front part of which was the saloon. In the back the side wall to the next building had been ripped out to give more room. There was a space for dancing, as well as roulette, faro, chuckaluck, and poker tables. In one corner a raised stand for the musicians had been built.

The Longhorn was practically deserted. Not even a game of draw was in progress. The dance-girls were making up for lost sleep, and the patrons of the place were either at work or still in bed.

Three men were lined up in front of the bar. One was a tall, lank person, hatchet-faced and sallow. He had a cast in his eye that gave him a sinister expression. The second was slender and trim, black of hair and eye and mustache. His clothes were very good and up to date. The one farthest from the door was a heavy-set, unwieldy man in jeans, slouchy as to dress and bearing. Perhaps it was the jade eyes of the man that made Roberts decide instantly he was one tough citizen.

The line-rider ordered a drink.

"Hardware, please," said the bartender curtly.

"Enforcin' that rule, are they?" asked Roberts casually as his eyes swept over the other men.

"That's whatever. Y'betcha. We don't want no gay cowboys shootin' out our lights. No reflections, y'understand."

The latest arrival handed over his revolver, and the man behind the bar hung the scabbard on a nail. Half a dozen others were on a shelf beside it. For the custom on the frontier was that each rider from the range should deposit his weapons at the first saloon he entered. They were returned to him when he called for them just before leaving town. This tended to lessen the number of sudden deaths.

"Who you ridin' for, young fellow?" asked the sallow man of Roberts.

"For the A T O."

The dark young man turned and looked at the cowboy.

"So? How long have you been riding for Wadley?"

"Nine months."

"Don't think I've seen you before."

"I'm a line-rider — don't often get to the ranch-house."

"What ground do you cover?"

"From Dry Creek to the rim-rock, and south past Box Cañon."

Three pair of eyes were focused watchfully on Roberts. The sallow man squirted tobacco at a knot in the floor and rubbed his bristly chin with the palm of a hand.

"Kinda lonesome out there, ain't it?" he ventured.

"That's as how you take it. The country *is* filled with absentees," admitted Roberts.

"Reckoned it was. Never been up that way myself. A sort of a bad-lands proposition, I've heard tell — country creased with arroyos, packed with rocks an' rattlesnakes mostly."

The heavy-set man broke in harshly. "Anybody else run cattle there except old man Wadley?"

"Settlers are comin' in on the other side of the rim-rock. Cattle drift across. I can count half a dozen brands 'most any day."

"But you never see strangers."

"Don't I?"

"I'm askin', do you?" The voice of the older man was heavy and dominant. It occurred to Roberts that he had heard that voice before.

"Oh!" Unholy imps of mirth lurked in the alert eyes of the line-rider. "Once in a while I do — last Thursday, for instance."

The graceful, dark young man straightened as does a private called to attention. "A trapper, maybe?" he said.

The cowboy brought his level gaze back from a barefoot negro washing the floor. "Not this time. He was a rustler."

"How do you know?" The high voice of the questioner betrayed excitement.

"I caught him brandin' a calf. He waved me round. I beat him to the Box Cañon and saw him ridin' through."

"You saw him ridin' through? Where were you?" The startled eyes of the dark young man were fixed on him imperiously.

"From the bluff above."

"You don't say!" The voice of the heavy man cut in with jeering irony. The gleam of his jade eyes came through narrow-slitted lids. "Well, did you take him back to the ranch for a necktie party, or did you bury him in the gulch?"

The dark young man interrupted irritably. "I'm askin' these questions, Dinsmore. Now you, young fellow — what's your name?"

"Jack Roberts," answered the cowboy meekly.

"About this rustler — would you know him again?"

The line-rider smiled inscrutably. He did not intend to tell all that he did not know. "He was ridin' a sorrel with a white splash on its nose, white stockin's, an' a bad hoof, the rear one —"

"You're a damn' liar." The words, flung out from some inner compulsion, as it were, served both as a confession and a challenge.

There was a moment of silence, tense and ominous. This was fighting talk.

The lank man leaned forward and whispered some remonstrance in the ear of the young fel-

low, but his suggestion was waved aside. "I'm runnin' this, Gurley."

The rider for the A T O showed neither surprise nor anger. He made a business announcement without stress or accent. "I expect it's you or me one for a lickin'. Hop to it, Mr. Rustler!"

Roberts did not wait for an acceptance of his invitation. He knew that the first two rules of battle are to strike first and to strike hard. His brown fist moved forward as though it had been shot from a gun. The other man crashed back against the wall and hung there dazed for a moment. The knuckles of that lean fist had caught him on the chin.

"Give him hell, Ford. You can curry a li'l' shorthorn like this guy with no trouble a-tall," urged Dinsmore.

The young man needed no urging. He gathered himself together and plunged forward. Always he had prided himself on being an athlete. He was the champion boxer of the small town where he had gone to school. Since he had returned to the West, he had put on flesh and muscle. But he had dissipated a good deal too, and no man not in the pink of condition had any right to stand up to tough Jack Roberts.

While the fight lasted, there was rapid action. Roberts hit harder and cleaner, but the other was the better boxer. He lunged and sidestepped cleverly, showing good foot-work and a nice

judgment of distance. For several minutes he peppered the line-rider with neat hits. Jack bored in for more. He drove a straight left home and closed one of his opponent's eyes. He smashed through the defense of his foe with a power that would not be denied.

"Keep a-comin', Ford. You shore have got him goin' south," encouraged Gurley.

But the man he called Ford knew it was not true. His breath was coming raggedly. His arms were heavy as though weighted with lead. The science upon which he had prided himself was of no use against this man of steel. Already his head was singing so that he saw hazily.

The finish came quickly. The cowboy saw his chance, feinted with his left and sent a heavy body blow to the heart. The knees of the other sagged. He sank down and did not try to rise again.

Presently his companions helped him to his feet. "He — he took me by surprise," explained the beaten man with a faint attempt at bluster.

"I'll bet I did," assented Jack cheerfully. "An' I'm liable to surprise you again if you call me a liar a second time."

"You've said about enough, my friend," snarled the man who had been spoken to as Dinsmore. "You get away with this because the fight was on the square, but don't push yore luck too far."

The three men passed out of the front door. Roberts turned to the barkeeper.

"I reckon the heavy-set one is Pete Dinsmore. The cock-eyed guy must be Steve Gurley. But who is the young fellow I had the mixup with?"

The man behind the bar gave information promptly. "He's Rutherford Wadley — son of the man who signs yore pay-checks. Say, I heard Buck Nelson needs a mule-skinner, in case you're lookin' for a job."

Jack felt a sudden sinking of the heart. He had as good as told the son of his boss that he was a rustler, and on top of that he had given him a first-class lacing. The air-castles he had been building came tumbling down with a crash. He had already dreamed himself from a trail foreman to the majordomo of the A T O ranch. Instead of which he was a line-rider out of a job.

"Where can I find Nelson?" he asked with a grin that found no echo in his heart. "Lead me to him."

CHAPTER IV

TEX GRANDSTANDS

CLINT WADLEY, massive and powerful, slouched back in his chair with one leg thrown over an arm of it. He puffed at a corncob pipe, and through the smoke watched narrowly with keen eyes from under heavy grizzled brows a young man standing on the porch steps.

"So now you know what I expect, young fellow," he said brusquely. "Take it or leave it; but if you take it, go through."

Arthur Ridley smiled. "Thanks, I'll take it."

The boy was not so much at ease as his manner suggested. He knew that the owner of the A T O was an exacting master. The old cattleman was game himself. Even now he would fight at the drop of the hat if necessary. In the phrase which he had just used, he would "go through" anything he undertook. Men who had bucked blizzards with him in the old days admitted that Clint would do to take along. But Ridley's awe of him was due less to his roughness and to the big place he filled in the life of the Panhandle than to the fact that he was the father of his daughter. It was essential to Arthur's plans that he stand well with the old-timer.

Though he did not happen to know it, young

Ridley was a favorite of the cattle king. He had been wished on him by an old friend, but there was something friendly and genial about the boy that won a place for him. His smile was modest and disarming, and his frank face was better than any letter of recommendation.

But though Wadley was prepared to like him, his mind held its reservations. The boy had come from the East, and the standards of that section are not those of the West. The East asks of a man good family, pleasant manners, a decent reputation, and energy enough to carry a man to success along conventional lines. In those days the frontier West demanded first that a man be game, and second that he be one to tie to. He might be good or bad, but whichever he was, he must be efficient to make any mark in the turbulent country of the border. Was there a hint of slackness in the jaw of this good-looking boy? Wadley was not sure, but he intended to find out.

"You'll start Saturday. I'll meet you at Tascosa two weeks from to-day. Understand?" The cattleman knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose. The interview was at an end.

Young Ridley nodded. "I'll be there, sir — with the six thousand dollars safe as if they were in a vault."

"H'm! I see you carry a six-shooter. Can you shoot?" Wadley flung at him abruptly.

Arthur Ridley had always fancied himself as a shot. He had belonged to a gun-club at home, and since coming to the Southwest he had practiced a good deal with the revolver.

"Pretty well, sir."

"Would you — if it was up to you?"

The youngster looked into the steel-gray eyes roofed by the heavy thatch of brow. "I think so. I never have had to yet. In the East —"

Wadley waved the East back to where it belonged. "Yes, I know. But we're talkin' about Texas. Still, I reckon you ought not to have any trouble on this trip. Don't let anybody know why you are at the fort. Don't gamble or drink. Get the money from Major Ponsford and melt away inconspicuous into the brush. Hit the trail hard. A day and a night ought to bring you to Tascosa."

The cattleman was leading the way with long strides into an open space back of the house. A pile of empty cans, symbol of the arid lands, lay beside the path. He picked up one and put it on a post. Then he stepped off fifteen paces.

"Ventilate it," he ordered.

The boy drew his revolver, took a long, steady aim, and fired. The bullet whistled past across the prairie. His second shot scored a clean hit. With pardonable pride he turned to the cattleman.

"Set up another can," commanded Wadley.

From the pile of empties the young man picked another and put it on the post. Wadley, known in Texas as a two-gun man, flashed into sight a pair of revolvers almost quicker than the eye could follow. Both shots came instantly and together. The cattleman had fired from the hips. Before the can had reached the ground the weapons barked again.

Ridley ran forward and picked up the can. It was torn and twisted with jagged holes, but the evidence was written there that all four bullets had pierced the tin. The Easterner could hardly believe his eyes. Such shooting was almost beyond human skill.

The owner of the A T O thrust into place his two forty-fives.

"If you're goin' to wear six-shooters, learn to use 'em, son. If you don't, some bad-man is liable to bump you off for practice."

As the two men stepped around the corner of the house a girl came down the steps of the porch. She was dressed in summer white, but she herself was spring. Slim and lissome, the dew of childhood was still on her lips, and the mist of it in her eyes. But when she slanted her long lashes toward Arthur Ridley, it was not the child that peeped shyly and eagerly out from beneath them. Her heart was answering the world-old call of youth to youth.

"I'm going downtown, Dad," she announced.

Ridley stepped forward and lifted his hat. "May I walk with you, Miss Ramona?"

"Stop at the post-office and see if the buckboard driver is in with the mail, 'Mona," her father said.

The boy and the girl made a couple to catch and hold the eye.

They went down the street together chattering gayly. One of the things young Ridley knew how to do well was to make himself agreeable to girls. He could talk nonsense charmingly and could hold his own in the jolly give-and-take of repartee. His good looks were a help. So too was the little touch of affectionate deference he used. He had the gift of being bold without being too bold.

It was a beautiful morning and life sang in the blood of Ramona. It seemed to her companion that the warm sun caressed the little curls at her temples as she moved down the street light as a deer. Little jets of laughter bubbled from her round, birdlike throat. In her freshly starched white dress, with its broad waistband of red and purple ribbon, the girl was sweet and lovely and full of mystery to Ridley.

A little man with a goatee, hawk-nosed and hawk-eyed, came down the street with jingling spurs to meet them. At sight of Ramona his eyes lighted. From his well-shaped gray head he swept in a bow a jaunty, broad-brimmed white hat.

The young girl smiled, because there were still a million unspent smiles in her warm and friendly heart.

"Good-morning, Captain Ellison," she called.

"Don't know you a-tall, ma'am." He shook his head with decision. "Never met up with you before."

"Good gracious, Captain, and you've fed me candy ever since I was a sticky little kid."

He burlesqued a business of recognizing her with much astonishment. "You ain't little 'Mona Wadley. No! Why, you are a young lady all dressed up in go-to-meet-him clothes. I reckon my little side-partner has gone forever."

"No, she has n't, Uncle Jim," the girl cried. "And I want you to know I still like candy."

He laughed with delight and slapped his thigh with his broad-brimmed ranger hat. "By dog, you get it, 'Mona, sure as I'm a foot high."

Chuckling, he passed down the street.

"Captain Jim Ellison of the Rangers," explained Ramona to her companion. "He is n't really my uncle, but I've known him always. He's a good old thing and we're great friends."

Her soft, smiling eyes met those of Arthur. He thought that it was no merit in Ellison to be fond of her. How could he help it?

"He's in luck," was all the boy said.

A little flag of color fluttered in her cheek. She

liked his compliments, but they embarrassed her a little.

"Did you fix it all up with Dad?" she asked, by way of changing the subject.

"Yes. I'm to go to Fort Winston to get the money for the beeves, and if I fall down on the job I'll never get another from him."

"I believe you're afraid of Dad," she teased.

"Don't you believe it — know it. I sure enough am," he admitted promptly.

"Why? I can twist him round my little finger," she boasted.

"Yes, but I'm not his only daughter and the prettiest thing in West Texas."

She laughed shyly. "Are you sure you're taking in enough territory?"

"I'll say south of Mason and Dixon's line, if you like."

"Really, he likes you. I can tell when Dad is for any one."

A sound had for some minutes been disturbing the calm peace of the morning. It was the bawling of thirsty cattle. The young people turned a corner into the main street of the town. Down it was moving toward them a cloud of yellow dust stirred up by a bunch of Texas longhorns. The call of the cattle for drink was insistent. Above it rose an occasional sharp "Yip yip!" of a cowboy.

Ramona stopped, aghast. The cattle blocked the road, their moving backs like the waves of a

sea. The dust would irreparably soil the clean frock fresh from the hands of her black mammy. She made as if to turn, and knew with a flash of horror that it was too late.

Perhaps it was the gleam of scarlet in her sash that caught the eye of the bull leading the van. It gave a bellow of rage, lowered its head, and dashed at her.

Ramona gave a horror-stricken little cry of fear and stood motionless. She could not run. The fascination of terror held her paralyzed. Her heart died away in her while the great brute thundered toward her.

Out of the dust-cloud came a horse and rider in the wake of the bull. Frozen in her tracks, Ramona saw with dilated eyes all that followed. The galloping horse gained, was at the heels of the maddened animal, drew up side by side. It seemed to the girl that in another moment she must be trampled underfoot. Nothing but a miracle from God's blue could save her.

For what registered as time without end to the girl's fear-numbed brain, horse and bull raced knee to knee. Then the miracle came. The rider leaned far out from the saddle, loosened his feet from the stirrups, and launched himself at the crazed half-ton of charging fury.

His hands gripped the horns of the bull. He was dragged from the saddle into the dust, but his weight deflected the course of the animal.

With every ounce of strength given by his rough life in the open the cowboy hung on, dragging the head of the bull down with him toward the ground. Man and beast came to a slithering halt together in a great cloud of dust not ten feet from Ramona.

Even now terror held her a prisoner. The brute would free itself and stamp the man to death. A haze gathered before her eyes. She swayed, then steadied herself. Man and bull were fighting desperately, one with sheer strength, the other with strength plus brains and skill. The object of the animal was to free itself. The bull tossed wildly in frantic rage to shake off this incubus that had fastened itself to its horns. The man hung on for life. All his power and weight were centered in an effort to twist the head of the bull sideways and back. Slowly, inch by inch, by the steady, insistent pressure of muscles as well packed as any in Texas, the man began to gain. The bull no longer tossed and flung him at will. The big roan head went down, turned backward, yielded to the pressure on the neck-muscles that never relaxed.

The man put at the decisive moment his last ounce of strength into one last twist. The bull collapsed, went down heavily to its side.

A second cowboy rode up, roped the bull, and deftly hogtied it.

The bulldogger rose and limped forward to the girl leaning whitely against a wall.

"Sorry, Miss Wadley. I had n't ought to have brought the herd through town. We was drivin' to water."

"Are you hurt?" Ramona heard her dry, faint voice ask.

"Me!" he said in surprise. "Why, no, ma'am."

He was a tall, lean youth, sunburned and tough, with a face that looked sardonic. Ramona recognized him now as her father's new foreman, the man she had been introduced to a few days before. Hard on that memory came another. It was this same Jack Roberts who had taken her brother by surprise and beaten him so cruelly only yesterday.

"It threw you around so," she murmured.

"Sho! I reckon I can curry a li'l' ol' longhorn when I have it to do, ma'am," he answered, a bit embarrassed.

"Are — are you hurt?" another voice quavered.

With a pang of pain Ramona remembered Arthur Ridley. Where had he been when she so desperately needed help?

"No. Mr. Roberts saved me." She did not look at Ridley. A queer feeling of shame for him made her keep her eyes averted.

"I — went to get help for you," the boy explained feebly.

"Thank you," she said.

The girl was miserably unhappy. For the boy

to whom she had given the largesse of her friendship had fled in panic; the one she hated for bullying and mistreating her brother had flung himself in the path of the furious bull to save her.

Captain Ellison came running up. He bristled at the trail foreman like a bantam. "What do you mean by drivin' these wild critters through town? Ain't you got a lick o' sense a-tall? If anything had happened to this little girl —"

The Ranger left his threat suspended in midair. His arms were round Ramona, who was sobbing into his coat.

The red-headed foreman shifted his weight from one foot to another. He was acutely uncomfortable at having made this young woman weep. "I ain't got a word to say, Captain. It was plumb thoughtless of me," he apologized.

"You come to my office this mo'nin' at twelve o'clock, young fellow. Hear me? I've got a word to say to you."

"Yes," agreed the bulldogger humbly. "I did n't go for to scare the young lady. Will you tell her I'm right sorry, Captain?"

"You eat yore own humble pie. You've got a tongue, I reckon," snorted Ellison, dragging at his goatee fiercely.

The complexion of Roberts matched his hair. "I — I — I'm turrible sorry, miss. I'd ought to be rode on a rail."

With which the range-rider turned, swung to the saddle of his pony without touching the stirrups, and fairly bolted down the street after his retreating herd.

CHAPTER V

CAPTAIN ELLISON HIRES A HAND

CAPTAIN ELLISON was preparing for the Adjutant-General a report of a little affair during which one of his men had been obliged to snuff out the lives of a couple of Mexican horsethieves and seriously damage a third. Writing was laborious work for the Captain of Rangers, though he told no varnished tale. His head and shoulders were hunched over the table and his finger-tips were cramped close to the point of the pen. Each letter as it was set down had its whispered echo from his pursed lips.

"Doggone these here reports," he commented in exasperation. "Looks like a man had n't ought to make out one every time he bumps off a rustler."

He tugged at his goatee and read again what he had just written:

> Then this José Barela and his gang of skoundrels struck out for the Brazos with the stolen stock. Ranger Cullom trailed them to Goose Creek and recovered the cattle. While resisting arrest Barela and another Mexican were killed and a third wounded. Cullom brought back the wounded man and the rustled stock.

A short noontime shadow darkened the sunny doorway of the adobe office. Ellison looked up

quickly, his hand falling naturally to the handle of his forty-five. Among the Rangers the price of life was vigilance. A tall, lean, young man with a sardonic eye and a sunburned face jingled up the steps.

"Come in," snapped the Captain. "Sit down. With you in a minute."

The cowboy lounged in, very much at his ease. Roberts had been embarrassed before Ramona Wadley that morning, but he was not in the least self-conscious now. In the course of a short and turbid life he had looked too many tough characters in the eye to let any mere man disturb his poise.

"Do you spell *scoundrel* with a *k?*" the Ranger chief fired abruptly at him.

"Nary a *k*, Captain. I spell it *b-a-d m-a-n.*"

"H'mp!" snorted the little man. "Ain't you got no education? A man 's got to use a syllogism oncet in a while, I reckon."

"Mebbeso. What kind of a gun is it?" drawled Jack Roberts.

"A syllogism is a word meanin' the same as another word, like as if I was to say *caballo* for *horse* or *six-shooter* for *revolver.*"

"I see — or *tough guy* for *Texas ranger.*"

"Or *durn fool* for *Jack Roberts,*" countered Ellison promptly.

"Now you're shoutin', Cap. Stomp on me proper. I certainly need to be curried."

Again the Ranger snorted. "H'mp! Been scarin' any more young ladies to death?"

"No more this mo'nin', Captain," answered Jack equably.

"Nor grandstandin' with any more *ladino* steers?"

"I exhibit only once a day."

"By dog, you give a sure-enough good show," exploded Ellison. "You got yore nerve, boy. Wait around till the prettiest girl in Texas can see you pull off the big play — run the risk of havin' her trampled to death, just so's you can grin an' say, 'Pleased to meet you, ma'am.' When I call you durn fool, I realize it's too weak a name."

"Hop to it, Captain. Use up some real language on me. Spill out a lot of those syllogisms you got bottled up inside you. I got it comin'," admitted Roberts genially as he rolled a cigarette.

The Captain had been a mule-skinner once, and for five glorious minutes he did himself proud while the graceless young cow-puncher beamed on him.

"You sure go some, Cap," applauded the young fellow. "I'd admire to have your flow of talk."

Ellison subsided into anticlimax. "Well, don't you ever drive yore wild hill-critters through town again. Hear me, young fellow?"

"You'll have to speak to Wadley about that. I'm not his trail boss any longer."

"Since when?"

"Since five o'clock yesterday evenin'. I was turnin' over the herd this mo'nin' when the little lady showed up an' I had to pull off the bull-doggin'."

"Wadley fire you?"

"That's whatever."

"Why?"

"Did n't like the way I mussed up son Rutherford, I kind o' gathered."

"Another of yore fool plays. First you beat up Wadley's boy; then you 'most massacree his daughter. Anything more?"

"That's all up to date — except that the old man hinted I was a brand-burner."

"The deuce he did!"

"I judge that son Rutherford had told him I was one of the Dinsmore gang. Seems I'm all right except for bein' a rowdy an' a bully an' a thief an' a bad egg generally."

"H'mp! Said you was a rustler, did he?" The Ranger caressed his goatee and reflected on this before he pumped a question at the line-rider. "Are you?"

"No more than Rutherford Wadley."

The Captain shot a swift slant look at this imperturbable young man. Was there a hidden meaning in that answer?

"What's the matter with Wadley? Does he expect you to let Ford run it over you? That ain't like Clint."

"He's likely listened to a pack o' lies."

"And you have n't heard from him since?"

"Yes, I have. He sent me my check an' a hundred-dollar bill."

Ellison sat up. "What for?"

"For my fancy bulldoggin'." The hard eyes of the young fellow smouldered with resentment.

"By dog, did Clint send you money for savin' 'Mona?"

"He did n't say what it was for — so I rolled up the bill an' lit a cigarette with it."

"You take expensive smokes, young man," chuckled the officer.

"It was on Wadley. I burned only half the bill. He can cash in the other half, for I sent it back to him. When he got it, he sent for me."

"And you went?"

"You know damn well I did n't. When he wants me, he knows where to find me."

"Most young hill-billies step when Clint tells 'em to."

"Do they?" asked the range-rider indifferently.

"You bet you. They jump when he whistles. What are you figurin' to do?"

"Have n't made up my mind yet. Mebbe I'll drift along the trail to the Pecos country."

"What was Clint payin' you?"

"Sixty a month an' found."

"How'd you like to have yore wages lowered?"

"Meanin'—"

"That I'll give you a job."

Young Roberts had a capacity for silence. He asked no questions now, but waited for Ellison to develop the situation.

"With the Rangers. Dollar a day an' furnish yore own bronc," explained the Captain.

"The State of Texas is liberal," said the cowboy with dry sarcasm.

"That's as you look at it. If you're a money-grubber, don't join us. But if you'd like to be one of the finest fightin' force in the world with somethin' doin' every minute, then you'd better sign up. I'll promise that you die young an' not in yore bed."

"Sounds right attractive," jeered the red-haired youngster with amiable irony.

"It is, for men with red blood in 'em," retorted the gray-haired fire-eater hotly.

"All right. I'll take your word for it, Captain. You've hired a hand."

CHAPTER VI

CLINT WADLEY'S MESSENGER

Outside the door of the commandant's office Arthur Ridley stood for a moment and glanced nervously up and down the dirt road. In a hog-leather belt around his waist was six thousand dollars just turned over to him by Major Ponsford as the last payment for beef steers delivered at the fort according to contract some weeks earlier.

Arthur had decided not to start on the return journey until next morning, but he was not sure his judgment had been good. It was still early afternoon. Before nightfall he might be thirty miles on his way. The trouble with that was that he would then have to spend two nights out, and the long hours of darkness with their flickering shadows cast by the camp-fires would be full of torture for him. On the other hand, if he should stay till morning, word might leak out from the officers' quarters that he was carrying a large sum of money.

A drunken man came weaving down the street. He stopped opposite Ridley and balanced himself with the careful dignity of the inebriate. But the gray eyes, hard as those of a gunman, showed no trace of intoxication. Nor did the steady voice.

"Friend, are you Clint Wadley's messenger?"

The startled face of Ridley flew a flag of confession. "Why — what do you mean?" he stammered. Nobody was to have known that he had come to get the money for the owner of the A T O.

"None of my business, you mean," flung back the man curtly. "Good enough! It ain't. What's more, I don't give a damn. But listen: I was at the Buffalo Hump when two fellows came in. Me, I was most asleep, and they sat in the booth next to me. I did n't hear all they said, but I got this — that they're aimin' to hold up some messenger of Clint Wadley after he leaves town tomorrow. You're the man, I reckon. All right. Look out for yourself. That's all."

"But — what shall I do?" asked Ridley.

"Do? I don't care. I'm tellin' you — see? Do as you please."

"What would *you* do?" The danger and the responsibility that had fallen upon him out of a sky of sunshine paralyzed the young man's initiative.

The deep-set, flinty eyes narrowed to slits. "What I'd do ain't necessarily what you'd better do. What are you, stranger — high-grade stuff, or the run o' the pen?"

"I'm no gun-fighter, if that's what you mean."

"Then I'd make my get-away like a jackrab-

bit hellpoppin' for its hole. I got one slant at these fellows in the Buffalo Hump. They're bully-puss kind o' men, if you know what I mean."

"I don't. I'm from the East."

"They'll run it over you, bluff you off the map, take any advantage they can."

"Will they fight?"

"They'll burn powder quick if they get the drop on you."

"What are they like?"

The Texan considered. "One is a tall, red-headed guy; the other's a sawed-off, hammered-down little runt — but gunmen, both of 'em, or I'm a liar."

"They would probably follow me," said the messenger, worried.

"You better believe they will, soon as they hear you've gone."

Arthur kicked a little hole in the ground with the toe of his shoe. What had he better do? He could stay at the fort, of course, and appeal to Major Ponsford for help. But if he did, he would probably be late for his appointment with Wadley. It happened that the cattleman and the army officer had had a sharp difference of opinion about the merits of the herd that had been delivered, and it was not at all likely that Ponsford would give him a military guard to Tascosa. Moreover, he had a feeling that the owner of the

A T O would resent any call to the soldiers for assistance. Clint Wadley usually played his own hand, and he expected the same of his men.

But the habit of young Ridley's life had not made for fitness to cope with a frontier emergency. Nor was he of stiff enough clay to fight free of his difficulty without help.

"What about you?" he asked the other man. "Can I hire you to ride with me to Tascosa?"

"As a tenderfoot-wrangler?" sneered the Texan.

Arthur flushed. "I've never been there. I don't know the way."

"You follow a gun-barrel road from the fort. But I'll ride with you — if the pay is right."

"What do you say to twenty dollars for the trip?"

"You've hired me."

"And if we're attacked?"

"I pack a six-shooter."

The troubled young man looked into the hard, reckless face of this stranger who had gone out of his way to warn him of the impending attack. No certificate was necessary to tell him that this man would fight.

"I don't know your name," said Ridley, still hesitating.

"Any more than I know yours," returned the other. "Call me Bill Moore, an' I'll be on hand to eat my share of the chuck."

"We'd better leave at once, don't you think?"

"You're the doc. Meet you here in an hour ready for the trail."

The man who called himself Bill Moore went his uncertain way down the street. To the casual eye he was far gone in drink. Young Ridley went straight to the corral where he had put up his horse. He watered and fed the animal, and after an endless half-hour saddled the bronco.

Moore joined him in front of the officers' quarters, and together they rode out of the post. As the Texan had said, the road to Tascosa ran straight as a gun-barrel. At first they rode in silence, swiftly, leaving behind them mile after mile of dusty trail. It was a brown, level country thickly dotted with yucca. Once Moore shot a wild turkey running in the grass. Prairie-chicken were abundant, and a flight of pigeons numbering thousands passed at one time over their heads and obscured the sky.

"Goin' down to the *encinal* to roost," explained Moore.

"A man could come pretty near living off his rifle in this country," Arthur remarked.

"Outside o' flour an' salt, I've done it many a time. I rode through the Pecos Valley to Fort Sumner an' on to Denver oncet an' lived off the land. Time an' again I've done it from the Brazos to the Canadian. If he gets tired of game, a man

can jerk the hind quarters of a beef. Gimme a young turkey fed on sweet mast an' cooked on a hackberry bush fire, an' I'll never ask for better chuck," the Texan promised.

In spite of Ridley's manifest desire to push on far into the night, Moore made an early camp.

"No use gauntin' our broncs when we've got all the time there is before us. A horse is a man's friend. He don't want to waste it into a sorry-lookin' shadow. Besides, we're better off here than at Painted Rock. It's nothin' but a whistlin'-post in the desert."

"Yes, but I'd like to get as far from the fort as we can. I — I'm in a hurry to reach Tascosa," the younger man urged.

Moore opened a row of worn and stained teeth to smile. "Don't worry, young fellow. I'm with you now."

After they had made camp and eaten, the two men sat beside the flickering fire, and Moore told stories of the wild and turbulent life he had known around Dodge City and in the Lincoln County War that was still waging in New Mexico. He had freighted to the Panhandle from El Moro, Colorado, from Wichita Falls, and even from Dodge. The consummate confidence of the man soothed the unease of the young fellow with the hogskin belt. This plainsman knew all that the Southwest had to offer of danger and was equal to any of it.

Presently Arthur Ridley grew drowsy. The last that he remembered before he fell asleep was seeing Moore light his pipe again with a live coal from the fire. The Texan was to keep the first watch.

It was well along toward morning when the snapping of a bush awakened Ridley. He sat upright and reached quickly for the revolver by his side.

"Don't you," called a voice sharply from the brush.

Two men, masked with slitted handkerchiefs, broke through the shin-oak just as Arthur whipped up his gun. The hammer fell once — twice, but no explosion followed. With two forty-fives covering him, Ridley, white to the lips, dropped his harmless weapon.

Moore came to life with sleepy eyes, but he was taken at a disadvantage, and with a smothered oath handed over his revolver.

"Wha-what do you want?" asked Ridley, his teeth chattering.

The shorter of the two outlaws, a stocky man with deep chest and extraordinarily broad shoulders, growled an answer.

"We want that money of Clint Wadley's you're packin'."

The camp-fire had died to ashes, and the early-morning air was chill. Arthur felt himself trembling so that his hands shook. A prickling of the

skin went goose-quilling down his back. In the dim light those masked figures behind the business-like guns were sinister with the threat of mystery and menace.

"I — have n't any money," he quavered.

"You 'd better have it, young fellow, me lad!" jeered the tall bandit. "We're here strictly for business. Dig up."

"I don't reckon he 's carryin' any money for Clint," Moore argued mildly. "Don't look reasonable that an old-timer like Clint, who knocked the bark off'n this country when I was still a kid, would send a tenderfoot to pack gold 'cross country for him."

The tall man swung his revolver on Moore. "'Nuff from you," he ordered grimly.

The heavy-set outlaw did not say a word. He moved forward and pressed the cold rim of his forty-five against the forehead of the messenger. The fluttering heart of the young man beat hard against his ribs. His voice stuck in his throat, but he managed to gasp a surrender.

"It 's in my belt. For God's sake, don't shoot."

"Gimme yore belt."

The boy unbuckled the ribbon of hogskin beneath his shirt and passed it to the man behind the gun. The outlaw noticed that his fingers were cold and clammy.

"Stand back to back," commanded the heavy man.

Deftly he swung a rope over the heads of his captives, jerked it tight, wound it about their bodies, knotted it here and there, and finished with a triple knot where their heels came together.

"That'll hold 'em hitched a few minutes," the lank man approved after he had tested the rope.

"I'd like to get a lick at you fellows. I will, too, some day," mentioned Moore casually.

"When you meet up with us we'll be there," retorted the heavy-weight. "Let's go, Steve."

The long man nodded. "*Adiós*, boys."

"See you later, and when I meet up with you, it'll be me 'n' you to a finish," the Texan called.

The thud of the retreating hoofs grew faint and died. Already Moore was busy with the rope that tied them together.

"What's the matter, kid? You shakin' for the drinks? Did n't you see from the first we were n't in any danger? If they'd wanted to harm us, they could have shot us from the brush. How much was in that belt?"

"Six thousand dollars," the boy groaned.

"Well, it does n't cost you a cent. Cheer up, son."

By this time Moore had both his arms free and was loosening one of the knots.

"I was in charge of it. I'll never dare face Mr. Wadley."

"Sho! It was his own fault. How in Mexico

come he to send a boy to market for such a big stake?"

"Nobody was to have known what I came for. I don't see how it got out."

"Must 'a' been a leak somewhere. Don't you care. Play the hand that's dealt you and let the boss worry. Take it from me, you're lucky not to be even powder-burnt when a shot from the chaparral might have done yore business."

"If you only had n't fallen asleep!"

"Reckon I dozed off. I was up 'most all last night." Moore untied the last knot and stepped out from the loop. "I'm goin' to saddle the broncs. You ride in to Tascosa and tell Wadley. I'll take up the trail an' follow it while it's warm. We'll see if a pair of shorthorns can run a sandy like that on me." He fell suddenly into the violent, pungent speech of the mule-skinner.

"I'll go with you," announced Ridley. He had no desire to face Clint Wadley with such a lame tale.

The cold eyes of the Texan drilled into his. "No, you won't. You'll go to town an' tell the old man what's happened. Tell him to send his posse across the *malpais* toward the rim-rock. I'll meet him at Two Buck Crossin' with any news I've got."

A quarter of an hour later the hoofs of his horse flung back faint echoes from the distance. The boy collapsed. His head sank into his hands and his misery found vent in sobs.

CHAPTER VII

THE DANCE

Long since the sun had slid behind the horizon edge and given place to a desert night of shimmering moonlight and far stars. From the enchanted mesa Rutherford Wadley descended to a valley draw in which were huddled a score of Mexican *jacals*, huts built of stakes stuck in a trench, roofed with sod and floored with mud. Beyond these was a more pretentious house. Originally it had been a log "hogan," but a large adobe addition had been constructed for a store. Inside this the dance was being held.

Light filtered through the chinks in the mud. From door and windows came the sounds of scraping fiddles and stamping feet. The singsong voice of the caller and the occasional whoop of a cowboy punctuated the medley of noises.

A man whose girth would have put Falstaff to shame greeted Rutherford wheezily. "Fall off and 'light, Ford. She's in full swing and the bridle's off."

The man was Jumbo Wilkins, line-rider for the A T O.

Young Wadley swung to the ground. He did not trouble to answer his father's employee. It was in little ways like this that he endeared him-

self to those at hand, and it was just this spirit that the democratic West would not tolerate. While the rider was tying his horse to the hitch-rack, Jumbo Wilkins, who was a friendly soul, made another try at conversation.

"Glad you got an invite. Old man Cobb had n't room for everybody, so he did n't make his bid wide open."

The young man jingled up the steps. "That so? Well, I did n't get an invite, as you call it. But I'm here." He contrived to say it so offensively that Jumbo flushed with anger.

Wadley sauntered into the room and stood for a moment by the door. His trim, graceful figure and dark good looks made him at once a focus of eyes. Nonchalantly he sunned himself in the limelight, with that little touch of swagger that captures the imagination of girls. No man in the cow-country dressed like Rutherford Wadley. In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed are kings, and to these frontier women this young fellow was a glass of fashion. There was about him, too, a certain dash, a spice of the devil more desirable in a breaker of hearts than any mere beauty.

His bold, possessive eyes ranged over the room to claim what they might desire. He had come to the dance at Tomichi Creek to make love to Tony Alviro's betrothed sweetheart Bonita.

She was in the far corner with her little court

about her. If Bonita was a flirt, it must be admitted she was a charming one. No girl within a day's ride was so courted as she. Compact of fire and passion, brimming with life and health, she drew men to her as the flame the moth.

Presently the music started. Bonita, in the arms of Tony, floated past Rutherford, a miracle of supple lightness. A flash of soft eyes darted at the heir of the A T O ranch. In them was a smile adorable and provocative.

As soon as the dance was over, Wadley made his way indolently toward her. He claimed the next waltz.

She had promised it to Tony, the girl said — and the next.

"Tony can't close-herd you," laughed Rutherford. "His title ain't clear yet — won't be till the priest has said so. You'll dance the second one with me, Bonita."

"We shall see, *señor*," she mocked.

But the Mexican blood in the girl beat fast. In her soft, liquid eyes lurked the hunger for sex adventure. And this man was a prince of the blood — the son of Clint Wadley, the biggest cattleman in West Texas.

There were challenging stars of deviltry in Bonita's eyes when they met those of Rutherford over the shoulder of Alviro while she danced, but the color was beating warm through her dark skin. The lift of her round, brown throat to

an indifferent tilt of the chin was mere pretense. The languorous passion of the South was her inheritance, and excitement mounted in her while she kept time to the melodious dance.

Alviro was master of ceremonies, and Wadley found his chance while the young Mexican was of necessity away from Bonita. Rutherford bowed to her with elaborate mockery.

"Come. Let us walk in the moonlight, sweetheart," he said.

Bonita turned to him with slow grace. The eyes of the man and the woman met and fought. In hers there was a kind of savage fierceness, in his an insolent confidence.

"No," she answered.

"Ah! You're afraid of me — afraid to trust yourself with me," he boasted.

She was an untutored child of the desert, and his words were a spur to her quick pride. She rose at once, her bosom rising and falling fast. She would never confess that — never.

The girl walked beside him with the fluent grace of youth, beautiful as a forest fawn. In ten years she would be fat and slovenly like her Mexican mother, but now she carried her slender body as a queen is supposed to but does not. Her heel sank into a little patch of mud where some one had watered a horse. Under the cottonwoods she pulled up her skirt a trifle and made a *moue* of disgust at the soiled slipper.

"See what you've done!" Small, even teeth gleamed in a coquettish smile from the ripe lips of the little mouth. He understood that he was being invited to kneel and clean the mud-stained shoe.

"If you're looking for a doormat to wipe your feet on, I'll send for Tony," he jeered.

The father of Bonita was Anglo-Saxon. She flashed anger at his presumption.

"Don't you think it. Tony will never be a doormat to anybody. Be warned, *señor*, and do not try to take what is his."

Again their eyes battled. Neither of them saw a man who had come out from the house and was watching them from the end of the porch.

"I take what the gods give, my dear, and ask leave of no man," bragged Wadley.

"Or woman?"

"Ah! That is different. When the woman is Bonita, *muchacha*, I am her slave."

He dropped to one knee and with his handkerchief wiped the mud from the heel of her slipper. For a moment his fingers touched lightly the trim little ankle; then he rose quickly and caught her in his arms.

"Sometime — soon — it's going to be me and you, sweetheart," he whispered.

"Don't," she begged, struggling against herself and him. "If Tony sees —"

His passion was too keen-edged to take warn-

ing. He kissed her lips and throat and eyes. The eyes of the watcher never wavered. They were narrowed to shining slits of jet.

"Why do you come and — and follow me?" the girl cried softly. "It is not that you do not know Tony is jealous. This is not play with him. He loves me and will fight for me. You are mad."

"For love of you!" he laughed triumphantly.

She knew he lied. The instinct that served her for a conscience had long since told her as much. But her vanity, and perhaps something deeper, craved satisfaction. She wanted to believe he meant it. Under his ardent gaze the long lashes of the girl drooped to her dusky cheeks. It was Tony she loved, but Tony offered her only happiness and not excitement.

A moment later she gave a startled little cry and pushed herself free. Her dilated eyes were fixed on something behind the cattleman.

Rutherford, warned by her expression, whirled on his heel.

Tony Alviro, knife in hand, was close upon him. Wadley lashed out hard with his left and caught the Mexican on the point of the chin.

The blow lifted Tony from his feet and flung him at full length to the ground. He tried to rise, groaned — rolled over.

Bonita was beside him in an instant. From where she knelt, with Tony's dark head in her

arms pressed close to her bosom, she turned fiercely on Wadley.

"I hate you, dog of a *gringo!* You are all one big lie through and through — what they call bad egg — no good!"

Already half a dozen men were charging from the house. Jumbo pinned Wadley's arms by the elbows to prevent him from drawing a revolver.

"What's the rumpus?" he demanded.

"The fellow tried to knife me in the back," explained Rutherford. "Jealous, because I took his girl."

"So?" grunted Wilkins. "Well, you'd better 'ight a shuck out o' here. You came on yore own invite. You can go on mine."

"Why should I go? I'll see you at Tombstone first."

"Why?" Jumbo's voice was no longer amiable and ingratiating. "Because you gave Tony a raw deal, an' he's got friends here. Have *you?*"

Wadley looked round and saw here and there Mexican faces filled with sullen resentment. It came to him swiftly that this was no place for his father's son to linger.

"I don't push my society on any one," he said haughtily. "If I ain't welcome, I'll go. But I serve notice right here that any one who tries to pull a knife on me will get cold lead next time."

Jumbo, with his arm tucked under that of Wadley, led the way to the house. He untied the

rein of Rutherford's horse and handed it to the son of his boss.

"*Vamos!*" he said.

The young man pulled himself to the saddle. "You're a hell of a friend," he snarled.

"Who said anything about bein' a friend? I'm particular about when I use that word," replied Wilkins evenly, with hard eyes.

Wadley's quirt burned the flank of the cow-pony and it leaped for the road.

When five minutes later some one inquired for Tony he too had disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII

RUTHERFORD MAKES A MISTAKE

RUTHERFORD WADLEY struck across country toward the rim-rock. Anger burned high in him, and like the bully he was he took it out of his good horse by roweling its sides savagely. He plunged into the curly mesquite, driving forward straight as an arrow. Behind him in the darkness followed a shadow, sinister and silent, out of sight, but within sound of the horse's footfall. It stopped when Wadley stopped; when he moved, it moved.

Midnight found young Wadley still moving straight forward, the moon on his left. Painted Rock was ten miles to the west. Except for the stage station there, and the settlement he had left, there was no other habitation for fifty miles. It was a wilderness of silence.

Yet in that waste of empty space Rutherford "jumped up" a camper. The man was a trader, carrying honey and pecans to Fort Worth. He was awakened by the sound of a raucous curse, he testified later, and in the bright moonlight saw the young cattleman beating his horse. Evidently the young animal had been startled at sight of his white-topped wagon.

An angry sentence or two passed between the

men before the cattleman moved over the hill-brow. As the trader rolled up again in his *sugun*, there came to him faintly the sound of another horse. He was not able to explain later why this struck him as ominous, beyond the strangeness of the fact that two men, not in each other's company, should be traveling so close together in the desert. At any rate, he rose, crept forward to a clump of Spanish bayonet, and from behind it saw a young Mexican pass along the swale. He was close enough almost to have touched him, and in the rich moonlight saw the boyish face clearly.

By the time Wadley reached the rough country of the cap-rock, the young day was beginning to awaken. A quail piped its morning greeting from the brush. A gleam of blue in the dun sky flashed warning of a sun soon to rise. He had struck the rim-rock a little too far to the right, and deflected from his course to find the pocket he was seeking. For half a mile he traveled parallel to the ridge, then turned into a break in the wall. At the summit of a little rise he gave a whistle.

Presently, from above a big boulder, a head appeared cautiously.

"Hello, out there! Who is it?"

"Ford."

The rider swung to the ground stiffly and led his horse forward down a sharply descending

path to a little draw. A lank, sallow man with a rifle joined him. With his back to a flat rock, a heavy-set, broad-shouldered fellow was lounging.

"'Lo, Ford. Didn't expect you to-night," he grumbled.

"Drifted over from the dance at Tomichi Creek. Beat up a young Mexican and had to get out."

"You're such a sullen brute! Why can't you let folks alone?" Pete Dinsmore wanted to know.

He was annoyed. Rutherford Wadley was not a partner in the business on hand to-night, and he would rather the man had been a hundred miles away.

"He got jealous and tried to knife me," explained the heir of the A T O sulkily.

"You durn fool! Won't you ever learn sense? Who was it this time?"

"Tony Alviro. His girl's crazy about me."

The keen, hard eyes of Dinsmore took in the smug complacency of the handsome young cad. He knew that this particular brand of fool would go its own way, but he wasted a word of advice.

"I don't guess you want any pearls o' wisdom from me, but I'll onload some gratis. You let Bonita Menendez alone or Tony will camp on yore trail till he gits you."

"Sure will," agreed Gurley, setting down his

rifle. "Them Mexicans hang together, too. We need their friendship in our business. Better lay off them."

"I don't remember askin' your advice, Gurley."

"Well, I'm givin' it. See?"

Another sharp whistle cut the air. Gurley picked up the rifle again and climbed the lookout rock. Presently he returned with a dismounted horseman. The man was the one who had introduced himself to Arthur Ripley a few hours earlier as Bill Moore.

"Howdy, boys. Got the stuff all safe?" he asked cheerfully.

From behind Wadley Pete Dinsmore was making a series of facial contortions. Unfortunately the new arrival did not happen to be looking at him, and so missed the warning.

"Never saw anything work prettier," Moore said with a grin as he put down his saddle on a boulder. "Ridley had n't ought to be let out without a nurse. He swallowed my whole yarn — gobbled down bait, sinker an' line. Where's the gold, Pete?"

"In a sack back of the big rock." Pete was disgusted with his brother Homer, *alias* Bill Moore. They would probably have to divide with young Wadley now, to keep his mouth shut.

Rutherford jumped at the truth. His father had told him that he was going to give Art Rid-

ley a try-out by sending him to the fort for a payment of gold. Probably he, Rutherford, had mentioned this to one of the gang when he was drunk. They had held up the messenger, intending to freeze him out of any share of the profits. All right — he would show them whether he was a two-spot.

"Bring out the sack. Let's have a look at it," he ordered.

Gurley handed the sack to Pete Dinsmore, and the men squatted in a circle tailor-fashion.

"Smooth work, I call it," said Homer Dinsmore. He explained to Wadley why he was of this opinion. "Steve heard tell of a wagon-train goin' to Tascosa to-day. If Ridley slept overnight at the fort he would hear of it an' stay with the freight outfit till he had delivered the gold to yore dad. We had to get him started right away. So I pulled on him a story about hearin' the boys intended to hold him up. He hired me as a guard to help him stand off the bad men. Whilst I was keepin' watch I fixed up his six-shooter so's it would n't do any damage if it went off. Best blamed piece of work I ever did pull off. I'd ought to get a half of what we took off'n him instead of a third."

"A third! Who says you get a third?" asked Wadley.

"Three of us did this job, did n't we?" cut in Gurley.

"Sure. You took what belongs to me — or at least to my dad," protested young Wadley. "Tried to slip one over on me. Guess again, boys. I won't stand for it."

The jade eyes of the older brother narrowed. "Meanin' just what, Ford?"

"What do you take me for, Pete? Think I'm goin' to let you rob me of my own money an' never cheep? I'll see you all in blazes first," cried Wadley wildly.

"Yes, but—just what would you do about it?"

"Do? I'll ride to town an' tell Cap Ellison. I'll bust you up in business, sure as hell's hot."

There was a moment of chill silence. Three of the four men present knew that Rutherford Wadley had just passed sentence of death upon himself. They had doubted him before, vaguely, and without any definite reason. But after this open threat the fear that he would betray them would never lift until he was where he could no longer tell tales.

"How much of this money do you think is comin' to you, Ford?" asked Pete quietly.

"It 's all mine, anyhow. You boys know that." Rutherford hesitated; then his greed dominated. He had them where they had to eat out of his hand. "Give me two thirds, an' you fellows divide the other third for your trouble. That's fair."

"Goddlemighty, what's eatin' you?" Gurley

exploded. "Think we're plumb idjits? You 'n' me will mix bullets first, you traitor!"

The Dinsmores exchanged one long, significant look. Then Pete spoke softly.

"Don't get on the prod, Steve. Ford sure has got us where the wool 's short, but I reckon he aims to be reasonable. Let's say half for you, Ford, an' the other half divided among the rest of us."

Wadley had refreshed himself out of a bottle several times during the night. Ordinarily he would have accepted the proposed compromise, but the sullen and obstinate side of him was uppermost.

"You've heard my terms, Pete. I stand pat."

Again a significant look passed, this time between Pete Dinsmore and Gurley.

"All right," said Homer Dinsmore shortly. "It's a raw deal you're givin' us, but I reckon you know yore own business, Wadley."

The money was emptied from the pigskin belt and divided. Rutherford repacked his two thirds in the belt and put it on next his shirt.

"I don't know what you fellows are goin' to do, but I'm goin' to strike for town," he said. "I aim to get back in time to join one of the posses in their hunt for the outlaws."

His jest did not win any smiles. The men grimly watched him saddle and ride away. A quarter of an hour later they too were in the saddle.

CHAPTER IX

MURDER IN THE CHAPARRAL

To Jack Roberts, engaged at the Delmonico restaurant in the serious business of demolishing a steak smothered in onions, came Pedro Menendez with a strange story of a man lying dead in the rim-rock, a bullet-hole in the back of his head.

The Mexican *vaquero* came to his news haltingly. He enveloped it in mystery. There was a dead man lying at the foot of Battle Butte, out in the rim-rock country, and there was this wound in the back of his head. That was all. Pedro became vague at once as to detail. He took refuge in shrugs and a poor memory when the Ranger pressed him in regard to the source of his information.

Roberts knew the ways of the Mexicans. They would tell what they wanted to tell and no more. He accepted the news given him and for the moment did not push his questions home.

For twenty-four hours the Ranger had been in the saddle, and he was expecting to turn in for a round-the-clock sleep. But Pedro's tale changed his mind. Captain Ellison was at Austin, Lieutenant Hawley at Tascosa. Regretfully Roberts gave up his overdue rest and ordered another cup

of strong coffee. Soon he was in the saddle again with a fresh horse under him.

The Panhandle was at its best. Winter snows and spring rains had set it blooming. The cacti were a glory of white, yellow, purple, pink, and scarlet blossoms. The white, lilylike flowers of the Spanish bayonet flaunted themselves everywhere. Meadowlarks chirruped gayly and prairie-hens fluttered across the path in front of the rider.

Battle Butte had received its name from an old tradition of an Indian fight. Here a party of braves had made a last stand against an overwhelming force of an enemy tribe. It was a flat mesa rising sharply as a sort of bastion from the rim-rock. The erosions of centuries had given it an appearance very like a fort.

Jack skirted the base of the butte. At the edge of a clump of prickly pear he found the evidence of grim tragedy which the circling buzzards had already warned him to expect. He moved toward it very carefully, in order not to obliterate any footprints. The body lay face down in a huddled heap, one hand with outstretched finger reaching forth like a sign-post. A bullet-hole in the back of the head showed how the man had come to his death. He had been shot from behind.

The Ranger turned the body and recognized it as that of Rutherford Wadley. The face was crushed and one of the arms broken. It was an

easy guess that the murder had been done on the butte above and the body flung down.

Jack, on all fours, began to quarter over the ground like a bloodhound seeking a trail. Every sense in him seemed to quicken to the hunt. His alert eyes narrowed in concentration. His fingertips, as he crept forward, touched the sand soft as velvet. His body was tense as a coiled spring. No cougar stalking its prey could have been more lithely wary.

For the Ranger had found a faint boot-track, and with amazing pains he was following this delible record of guilt. Some one had come here and looked at the dead body. Why? To make sure that the victim was quite dead? To identify the victim? Roberts did not know why, but he meant to find out.

The footprint was alone. Apparently none led to it or led from it. On that one impressionable spot alone had been written the signature of a man's presence.

But "Tex" Roberts was not an old plainsman for nothing. He knew that if he were patient enough he would find other marks of betrayal.

He found a second track — a third, and from them determined a course to follow. It brought him to a stretch of soft ground at the edge of a wash. The footprints here were sharp and distinct. They led up an arroyo to the bluff above.

The Ranger knelt close to the most distinct

print and studied it for a long time. All its details and peculiarities were recorded in his mind. The broken sole, the worn heel, the beveled edge of the toe-cap — all these fastened themselves in his memory. With a tape-line he measured minutely the length of the whole foot, of the sole and of the heel. These he jotted down in his notebook, together with cross-sections of width. He duplicated this process with the best print he could find of the left foot.

His investigation led him next to the summit of the bluff. A little stain of blood on a rock showed him where Wadley had probably been standing when he was shot. The murder might have been done by treachery on the part of one of his companions. If so, probably the bullet had been fired from a revolver. In that case the man who did it would have made sure by standing close behind his victim. This would have left powder-marks, and there had been none around the wound. The chances were that the shooting had been done from ambush, and if this was a true guess, it was a fair deduction that the assassin had hidden behind the point of rocks just back of the bluff. For he could reach that point by following the rim-rock without being seen by his victim.

Roberts next studied the ground just back of the point of rocks. The soil here was of disintegrated granite, so that there were no footprints

to betray anybody who might have been hidden there. But Jack picked up something that was in its way as decisive as what he had been seeking. It was a cartridge that had been ejected from a '73 [1] rifle. The harmless bit of metal in his hand was the receptacle from which death had flashed across the open toward Ford Wadley.

At the foot of the rim-rock the Ranger found signs where horses had been left. He could not at first make sure whether there were three or four. From that spot he back-tracked for miles along the edge of the rim-rock till he came to the night-camp where Wadley had met the outlaws. This, too, he studied for a long time.

He had learned a good deal, but he did not know why Ford Wadley had been shot. The young fellow had not been in Texas more than six or eight months, and he could not have made many enemies. If he had nothing about him worth stealing — and in West Texas men were not in the habit of carrying valuables — the object could not have been robbery.

He rode back to Battle Butte and carried to town with him the body of the murdered man. There he heard two bits of news, either of which might serve as a cause for the murder: Young Wadley had quarreled with Tony Alviro at a

[1] The '73 rifle was not a seventy-three-caliber weapon, but was named from the year it was got out. Its cartridges could be used for a forty-four revolver.

dance and grossly insulted him; Arthur Ridley had been robbed of six thousand dollars by masked men while on his way to Tascosa.

Ranger Roberts decided that he would like to have a talk with Tony.

CHAPTER X

"A DAMNED POOR APOLOGY FOR A MAN"

THE big cattleman from New Mexico who was talking with the owner of the A T O threw his leg across the arm of the chair. "The grass is good on the Pecos this year. Up in Mexico [1] the cattle look fine."

"Same here," agreed Wadley. "I'm puttin' ten thousand yearlin's on the Canadian."

A barefoot negro boy appeared at his elbow with a note. The owner of the A T O ripped open the envelope and read:

DEAR MR. WADLEY:

I was held up last night by masked men and robbed. They took the gold. I'm too sick to go farther.

ARTHUR RIDLEY.

The jaw of the Texas cattleman clamped. He rose abruptly. "I got business on hand. A messenger of mine has been robbed of six thousand dollars." He turned to the colored boy. "Where's the man who gave you this?"

"At the Buffalo Corral, sah."

Wadley strode from the hotel, flung himself on a horse, and galloped down the street toward the corral.

[1] In western Texas when one speaks of Mexico he means New Mexico. If he refers to the country Mexico, he says Old Mexico.

Young Ridley was lying on a pile of hay when his employer entered. His heart was sick with fear and worry. For he knew now that his lack of boldness had led him into a serious mistake. He had by his indecision put himself in the power of Moore, and the chances were that the man was in collusion with the gang that had held him up. He had made another mistake in not going directly to Wadley with the news. The truth was that he had not the nerve to face his employer. It was quite on the cards that the old-timer might use a blacksnake whip on him. So he had taken refuge in a plea of illness.

The cattleman took one look at him and understood. He reached down and jerked the young fellow from the hay as if he had been a child. The stomach muscles of the boy contracted with fear and the heart died within him. Clint Wadley in anger was dangerous. In his youth he had been a gun-fighter and the habit had never entirely been broken.

"I — I'm ill," the young fellow pleaded.

"You'll be sure enough ill if you don't watch out. I'll gamble on that. Onload yore tale like shot off'n a shovel. Quit yore whinin'. I got no time for it."

Arthur told his story. The cattleman fired at him crisp, keen questions. He dragged from the trembling youth the when, where, and how of the robbery. What kind of pilgrim was this fellow

Moore? Was he tall? Short? Dark? Bearded? Young? Old? What were the masked men like? Did they use any names? Did he see their horses? Which way did they go?

The messenger made lame answers. Mostly he could only say, "I don't know."

"You're a damned poor apology for a man — not worth the powder to blow you up. You had n't the sand to fight for the money entrusted to you, nor the nerve to face me after you had lost it. Get out of here. *Vamos!* Don't ever let me hear yore smooth, glib tongue again."

The words of Wadley stung like hail. Arthur was thin-skinned; he wanted the good opinion of all those with whom he came in contact, and especially that of this man. Like a whipped cur he crept away and hid himself in the barn loft, alone with his soul-wounds.

From its window he watched the swift bustle of preparation for the pursuit. Wadley himself, big and vigorous to the last masculine inch of him, was the dominant figure. He gave curt orders to the members of the posse, arranged for supplies to be forwarded to a given point, and outlined plans of action. In the late afternoon the boy in the loft saw them ride away, a dozen lean, long-bodied men armed to the limit. With all his heart the watcher wished he could be like one of them, ready for any emergency that the rough-and-tumble life of the frontier might develop.

In every fiber of his jarred being he was sore. He despised himself for his failure to measure up to the standard of manhood demanded of him by his environment. Twice now he had failed. The memory of his first failure still scorched his soul. During ghastly hours of many nights he had lived over that moment when he had shown the white feather before Ramona Wadley. He had run for his life and left her alone to face a charging bull. It was no excuse to plead with himself that he could have done nothing for her if he had stayed. At least he could have pushed her to one side and put himself in the path of the enraged animal. The loss of the money was different. It had been due not wholly to lack of nerve, but in part at least to bad judgment. Surely there was something to be said for his inexperience. Wadley ought not to have sent him alone on such an errand, though of course he had sent him because he was the last man anybody was likely to suspect of carrying treasure. . . .

Late that night Ridley crept out, bought supplies, saddled his horse, and slipped into the wilderness. He was still writhing with self-contempt. There was a futile longing in his soul for oblivion to blot out his misery.

CHAPTER XI

ONE TO FOUR

THROUGH the great gray desert with its freakish effects of erosion a rider had moved steadily in the hours of star-strewn darkness. He had crossed the boundary of that No Man's Land which ran as a neutral strip between Texas and its neighbor and was claimed by each. Since the courts had as yet recognized the rights of neither litigant there was properly no State jurisdiction here. Therefore those at outs with the law fled to this strip and claimed immunity.

In the Panhandle itself law was a variable quantity. Its counties had been laid out and named, but not organized. For judicial purposes they were attached to Wheeler County. Even the Rangers did not pretend to police this district. When they wanted a man they went in and got him.

The rider swung at last from his saddle and dropped the bridle reins to the ground. He crept forward to some long, flat sheep-sheds that bulked dimly in the night shadows. Farther back, he could just make out the ghost of a dwelling-hut. Beyond that, he knew, was a Mexican village of three or four houses. A windmill reared its gaunt frame in the corral. A long trough was supplied by it with water for the sheep.

The night-rider dipped a bucket of water from the tank that fed the trough. He carried it to the gate of the corral and poured it slowly into the fine dust made by the sharp feet of the sheep, mixing the water and dust to a thick paste with the end of an old branding-iron. He brought bucket after bucket of water until he had prepared a bed of smooth mud of the proper consistency.

Before he had quite finished his preparation a dog inside the adobe hut began to bark violently. The interloper slipped over the fence and retreated to the darkness of the *barranca.*

From the direction of the hut men poured. The one crouching in the chaparral heard voices. He made out a snatch or two of talk in Spanish. The men were explaining to themselves that the dog must have been barking at a wolf or a coyote. Presently they trooped back into the house. Silence fell again over the night.

The man in the chaparral once more crept forward and climbed the fence. He made straight for the entrance of the corral. Carefully he examined the footprints written in the bed of mud he had prepared. One after another he studied them. Some had been crossed out or blotted by subsequent prints, but a few were perfect. One of these he scrutinized for a long time, measuring its dimensions with a tape-line from toe to heel, across the ball of the foot, the instep, and the

heel. When at last he straightened up his eyes were shining with satisfaction. He had found what he wanted.

Once more the dog was uneasy with growlings. The man retreated from the corral, returned to his horse, and rode away across the mesa. A quarter of an hour later he unsaddled, hobbled his horse, and rolled up in a blanket. Immediately he fell into sound sleep.

It was broad day when he wakened. The young morning sun bathed him in warmth. He lighted a fire of mesquite and boiled coffee. In his frying-pan he cooked flapjacks, after he had heated the jerked beef which he carried in his saddlebags. When he had eaten, he washed his pan with clean, fine sand, repacked his supplies, and rode forward past the sheep-corral to the village.

In front of a mud-and-log *tendejón* two Mexicans lounged. They watched him with silent hostility as he dismounted, tied his horse to a snubbing-post worn shiny as a razor-strap, and sauntered into the *tendejón*. This stranger wore the broad-rimmed felt hat and the buckskin suit of a Ranger, and none of that force was welcome here.

Back of a flimsy counter was a shelf upon which were half a dozen bottles and some glasses. One could buy here mescal, American whiskey, and even wine of a sort. The owner of the place, a white man, was talking to a young Mexican

at the time the Ranger entered. The proprietor looked hard at the Ranger with dislike he did not try to veil. The Mexican in front of the bar was a slim young man with quick eyes and an intelligent face. The Ranger recognized him at once as Tony Alviro.

"*Buenos!*" the Ranger said with the most casual of nods. "I've come to take you back with me, Tony."

The other two Mexicans had followed the Ranger into the room. The Texan stood sideways at the end of the bar, quite at his ease, the right forearm resting on the counter lightly. Not far from his fingers the butt of a revolver projected from a holster. In his attitude was no threat whatever, but decidedly a warning.

The four men watched him steadily.

"No, *Señor* Roberts," answered Alviro. "You can touch me not. I'm out of Texas."

"Mebbeso, Tony. But till I get further orders, this is Texas for me. You're goin' back with me."

Rangers and outlaws held different views about this strip of land. To the latter it was a refuge; law ended at its border; they could not be touched here by State constabulary. But the Ranger did not split hairs. He was law in the Panhandle, and if the man he wanted fled to disputed territory the Ranger went after him.

"Not so," argued Alviro. "If you arrest me in Texas, I say 'Bad luck,' but I go wiz you.

There you are an offizer, an' I am oblige' surrender. But in thees No Man's Land, we are man to man. I refuse."

The lift of excitement was in the voice of the young Mexican. He knew the record of the Texas Rangers. They took their men in dead or alive. This particular member of the force was an unusually tough nut to crack. In the heart of Tony was the drench of a chill wave. He was no coward, but he knew he had no such unflawed nerve as this man. Through his mind there ran a common laconic report handed in by Rangers returning from an assignment — "Killed while resisting arrest." Alviro did not want Ranger Roberts to write that about him.

"Better not, Alviro. I have a warrant for your arrest."

The Texan did not raise his voice. He made no movement to draw a gun. But to Tony, fascinated by his hard, steel-gray eyes, came the certainty that he must go or fight. They were four to one against the Ranger, but that would not make the least difference. In the curt alternative of this clean-jawed young officer was cold finality.

The worried eyes of the fugitive referred to his companions. They had agreed to stand by him, and he knew that if it came to a fight they would. But he wanted more than that. His glance was an appeal for one of them to make his decision for him.

The voice of the *tendejón*-keeper interjected itself smoothly. "You've played yore hand out, friend. We're four to one. You go back an' report nothin' doin'."

Roberts looked at the man, and a little shiver ran down the barkeeper's spine. "There won't be four of you when we get through arguin' this, *amigo*, if we ever start," the Ranger suggested gently.

The proprietor of the place dropped his hand to the butt of his gun. But he did not draw. Some deep, wise instinct warned him to go slow. He knew the others would take their cue from him. If he threw down the gage of battle the room would instantly become a shambles. How many of them would again pass alive through the door nobody knew. He was a man who had fought often, but he could not quite bring himself to such a decision while those chilled-steel eyes bored into his. Anyhow, the game was not worth the candle.

"What is it you want Tony for?" he temporized, playing for time and any chance that might arise.

"For killin' Rutherford Wadley last month."

"A mistake. Tony has been here since the full of the moon."

"Oh, no. He was at the dance on Tomichi Creek. He tried to knife young Wadley. He left the house right after him."

"I left — *sí, señor* — but to come here," cried the accused man.

"To follow Wadley, Tony. You jumped a camper that night an' did n't know it. He saw you."

"Wadley was a dog, but I did not kill him," Alviro said gloomily.

"That so? You were on the spot. You left tracks. I measured 'em. They were the same tracks you left out in the corral five hours ago."

Tony's eyes flashed with a sudden discovery. "The mud — you meex it to get my footprints."

"You're a good guesser."

Alviro threw up his hands. "I was there. It iss true. But I did not kill the *gringo* dog. I was too late."

"You can tell me all about that on the way back."

"If I go back they will hang me."

"You'll get a fair trial."

"By a *gringo* jury before a *gringo* judge." The tone of Alviro was more than skeptical. It was bitter with the sense of racial injustice.

"I can't argue that with you, Tony. My business is to take you to Tascosa. That's what I'm here for."

The American behind the bar spoke again. "Listens fine! He's a Mexican, ain't he? They claim he killed a white man. Well, then, the mob would take him from you an' lynch him sure."

"The Rangers don't give up their prisoners, my friend. They take 'em an' they keep 'em. You'd ought to know that."

The *tendejón*-keeper flushed. He had been dragged to justice once by one of the force.

The eyes of the four consulted again. They were still hesitant. The shame of letting this youth take from them their companion without a fight was like a burr under a saddle-blanket to a bronco. But after all, the Ranger stood for law. If they killed him, other Rangers would come to avenge his death.

When men are in doubt the one who is sure dominates the situation. The eye of Roberts carried the compulsion of a deadly weapon. His voice was crisp.

"Come here, Tony," he ordered, and his fingers slipped into the pocket of his coat.

Alviro looked at him for a long second — swore to himself that he would not come — and came.

"Hold out yore hands."

The Mexican set his will to refuse. There was still time to elect to fight. He told himself that was what he was going to do. But he could not hold his own in that steady battle of the eyes. His hands moved forward — empty.

A moment, and the Ranger had slipped and fastened the handcuffs on his wrists.

Roberts had won. Psychologically it was now

too late for the others to resort to arms. The *tendejón*-keeper recognized this with a shrug that refused responsibility for the outcome. After all, Tony had made his own decision. He had chosen to take his chances in Tascosa rather than on the spot with the Ranger.

"Saddle Tony's horse," ordered Roberts, looking at one of the Mexicans.

The man growled something in his native tongue, but none the less he moved toward the corral.

Within a quarter of an hour the Ranger and his prisoner were on their way. Two days later Roberts delivered his man to the deputy sheriff who had charge of the sod-house jail in the little town.

"There's a message here for you from Cap Ellison," the deputy said. "He wants you to go to Clarendon. Says you were to jog on down soon as you show up here."

"All right, Snark."

He rode down next day, changed horses at the halfway station, and reached Clarendon early in the morning. Ellison had been called to Mobeetie, but left instructions for him to await his return.

The semi-weekly stage brought two days later a letter to Captain Ellison from Snark. Jack Roberts, obeying office instructions, opened the mail. The letter said:

Dere Cap,

They are aiming to lynch that Mexican Roberts brought in. The Dinsmore outfit is stirring up the town. Send a company of your Rangers, for God's sake, quick.

Respectably yours
Jim Snark

Jack Roberts was the only Ranger in town. He glanced at the clock. There was just time to catch the stage to Tascosa. He reached for his guns and his hat.

CHAPTER XII

TEX REARRANGES THE SEATING

THE Tascosa stage was full. Its passengers were "packed like Yanks at Libby Prison," according to one of them, an ex-Confederate who had drifted West after the war. They were of the varied types common to the old Southwest — a drover, a cattle-buyer, a cowpuncher looking for a job, a smart salesman from St. Louis, and one young woman. Beside the driver on the box sat a long-bodied man in buckskin with a clean brown jaw and an alert, sardonic eye.

The salesman, a smooth, good-looking fellow whose eye instinctively rested on attractive women, made inquiries of Joe Johnson's old trooper.

"Who's the damsel?"

"Which?"

"The girl. She's a pippin." His possessive eye gloated on the young woman in front. "She did n't learn how to dress in this neck of the woods, either. Betcha she's from New Orleans or St. Louis."

The old warrior helped himself to a chew of tobacco. "You lose. She's Clint Wadley's daughter, an' he's an old-timer. Knocked the bark off'n this country, Clint did. I used to know him

when he was takin' the hides off the buffaloes. Got his start that way, I reckon. Clint's outfit got six thousand tongues in six months oncet. Pickled the tongues an' sold 'em for three cents apiece, by gum. Delivered the hides at Clarendon for one-fifty straight on contract."

"I've heard of Wadley," the salesman said. "What's the kid going to Tascosa for?"

"Goin' to stay awhile with her aunt, I 'low. Her brother was killed recent."

"I've heard about that, too. They caught the fellow, did n't they — the one that did it?"

"They got a Mexican jailed for it. I dunno whether he done it or not. That young Ranger on the box run him down."

"That kid in buckskin?" sneered the city man.

The ex-Confederate bristled at the tone rather than the words. He happened to be a friend of the youth mentioned.

"I'll follow Jack's dust any day of the week. He's one hell-poppin' rooster. No better man rides leather. When I druv a wagon oncet gatherin' bones —"

"Gathering bones?"

"Sure — buffalo-bones, for fertilizer. Well, that same Jack Roberts yanked me out o' the Canadian when I was drowndin'. Took a big chance, too."

"What about this Mexican? Are they going to hang him?"

"I reckon. He's in a soddy up at Tascosa. I done heard they're aimin' to tear it down and hang him to a wagon-tongue."[1]

The black-haired traveling man caressed his little mustache and watched the girl boldly. Her face was a little wan, and in the deep eyes was shadowed a heartache. But it had been impossible even for grief to submerge the sweet youth in her. There were lights in her soft, wavy hair, and the line of her exquisite throat would have delighted a sculptor. The slim figure was exquisitely poised, though just now it suggested weariness.

When the stage stopped at noon for dinner the salesman made it a point to sit beside her at the long table. His persistent attentions to the girl made the delicate color of her cheek deepen. She was too shy, too unused to the world, to know how to suppress his audacities effectively. But it was plain to one young man sitting at the opposite end of the table that the familiarities of the man were unwelcome.

While they were waiting outside for the change-horses to be hitched, the Ranger made a request of the old soldier.

"Wish you'd swap places with me, Sam."

"Sure. I'd a heap ruther sit outside. Say, that drummer had n't ought to worry Miss Ramona.

[1] There was no timber in the Panhandle. The first man ever hanged in the short-grass country was suspended from a propped-up wagon-tongue.

She's not feelin' very peart, anyhow. I reckon she set the world an' all by that scalawag brother of hers."

"He's not goin' to trouble her any more, Sam."

The ex-Confederate looked at the narrow-flanked young man with an alert question in his eye. If "Tex" Roberts was going to take a hand, the salesman was certainly riding for a fall.

The salesman had made up his mind to sit beside Miss Wadley for the rest of the journey. He emerged from the dining-room at her heels and was beside her to offer a hand into the stage.

Ramona gave him a look of reproach and entreaty. She was near tears. The man from St. Louis smiled confidently.

"I know a good thing when I see it," he whispered. "I'll ride beside you and keep off the rough-necks, Miss Wadley."

A heavy heel smashed down on the toes of his neat shoe and crunched round. A hard elbow bumped up forcefully against his chin as if by accident. A muscular hand caught the loose fat of his plump stomach and tightened like a vise. The dapper salesman opened his mouth in a shriek of pain.

"Indigestion?" asked the Ranger sympathetically, and his sinewy fingers twisted in the cushion of flesh they gripped. "I'll get you somethin' good for it in a minute."

Roberts flung the man back and rearranged the seating inside so that the drover sat beside Ramona as before dinner. Then he tucked an arm under that of the St. Louis man and led him back into the stage station. The salesman jerked along beside him unhappily. His wrist, wrenched by Roberts in a steady pressure of well-trained muscles, hurt exquisitely. When at last he was flung helplessly into a chair, tears of pain and rage filled his eyes. Never in the course of a cushioned and pampered life had he been so manhandled.

"My God, you brute, you've killed me!" he sobbed.

"Sho! I have n't begun yet. If you take the stage to-day to Tascosa I'm goin' to sit beside you real friendly, an' we'll play like we been doin' all the way in to town. It's just my way of bein' neighborly."

"I'll have the law of you for this," the city man howled, uncertain which of his injuries to nurse first.

"I would," agreed the Texan. "Well, so long, if you ain't comin'."

Roberts moved back with long, easy stride to the stage. He nodded to the driver.

"All ready, Hank. The drummer ain't feelin' well. He'll stay here overnight. I reckon I'll keep my own seat outside, Sam." And Roberts swung himself up.

The old soldier climbed in, chuckling to himself. It had been the neatest piece of work he had ever seen. The big body of the cowboy had been between Ramona and her tormentor, so that she did not know what had taken place. She did know, however, that the woman-killer had been obliterated swiftly from her path.

"Did you ever see anything like the way he got shet o' that drummer?" Sam asked his neighbor in a whisper. "I'll bet that doggoned masher will be hard to find when Jack's on the map. He's some go-getter boy, Jack Roberts is."

Meanwhile Jack was flagellating himself. It was his bad luck always to be associated in the mind of Miss Wadley with violence. He had beaten up the brother whom she was now mourning. He had almost been the cause of her own death. Now a third time she saw him in the rôle of a trouble-maker. To her, of course, he could be nothing but a bully and a bad lot. The least he could do was to make himself as inconspicuous as possible for the rest of the journey.

Man may shuffle the pack, but when all is done woman is likely to cut the cards. The driver stopped at Tin Cup Creek to water the horses. To Jack, sitting on the box, came the cattle-drover with orders.

"The young lady has somethin' to say to you, Tex. You're to swap seats with me."

The lean, bronzed young man swung down.

He had, when he wished, a wooden face that told no tales. It said nothing now of a tide of blood flushing his veins.

By a little gesture the girl indicated the seat beside her. Not till the creaking of the moving stage drowned her words did she speak. Her eyes were dilated with excitement.

"I overheard them talking in the back seat," she said. "They think there's going to be a lynching at Tascosa — that the mob is going to hang the Mexican who killed my brother. Are you going to let them do it?"

"Not in this year of our Lord, Miss Wadley," he answered evenly.

"Can you stop them?"

"That's what I draw a dollar a day for."

"You must n't let them do it!" she cried, a little wildly. "Let the law punish him!"

"Suits me. I'll try to persuade the boys to look at it that way."

"But what can you do? You're only a boy."

With a grim little smile he paraphrased Roy Bean's famous phrase: "I'm law east of the Pecos right now, Miss Wadley. Don't you worry. The Dinsmores won't get him if I can help it."

"I might speak to my father," she went on, thinking aloud. "But he's so bitter I'm afraid he won't do anything."

"He will after I've talked with him."

Her anxious young eyes rested in his clear,

steady gaze. There was something about this youth that compelled confidence. His broad-shouldered vigor, the virile strength so confidently reposeful, were expressions of personality rather than accidentals of physique.

The road dipped suddenly into a deep wash that was almost a little gulch. There was a grinding of brakes, then a sudden lurch that threw Ramona against the shoulder of the Ranger.

"The brake's done bust," she heard the ex-Confederate say.

Another violent swing flung Ramona outward. The horses were off the road, and the coach swayed ominously on two wheels. The girl caught at the Ranger's hand and clung to it. Gently he covered her hand with his other one, released his fingers, and put a strong arm round her shoulders.

Hank's whip snaked out across the backs of the wheelers. He flung at his horses a torrent of abuse. The stage reached the bottom of the wash in a succession of lurches. Then, as suddenly as the danger had come upon them, it had passed; the stage was safely climbing the opposite side of the ravine.

The Ranger's arm slipped from the shoulders of the girl. Her hand crept from under his. He did not look at her, but he knew that a shell-pink wave had washed into the wan face.

The slim bosom of the girl rose and fell fast.

Already she was beginning to puzzle over the difficulties of a clear-cut right and wrong, to discover that no unshaded line of cleavage differentiates them sometimes. Surely this young fellow could not be all bad. Of course she did not like him. She was quite sure of that. He was known as a tough citizen. He had attacked and beaten brutally her brother Rutherford — the wild brother whose dissipations she had wept and prayed over, and whose death she was now mourning. Yet Fate kept throwing him in her way to do her services. He had saved her life. He had adroitly — somehow, she did not quite know in what way — rid her of an offensive fellow traveler. She had just asked a favor of him, and there was yet another she must ask.

Ramona put off her request to the last moment. At Tascosa she left her purse in the stage seat and discovered it after the coach had started to the barn.

"My purse. I left it in the seat," she cried.

The announcement was made to the world at large, but it was intended for a particular pair of ears set close to a small head of wavy, sun-reddened hair. The owner of them ran to the stage and recovered the purse. By the time he reached Ramona, the rest of the party were inside the post-office.

She thanked him, then looked at him quickly with an effect of shy daring.

"You travel a good deal, don't you — about the country?"

"Considerable."

"I — I wonder if —" She took courage from his friendly smile. "I'm worried about Mr. Ridley — for fear something has happened to him."

"You mean an accident?" he asked gently.

"I don't know." Her cheeks flew color-signals of embarrassment. "My father was harsh to him. He's very sensitive. I feel — sort of responsible. He might do something foolish."

"I don't reckon he will. But I'll sure keep an eye out for him."

She gave him her little hand gratefully, then remembered what he had done to her brother and withdrew it hastily from his grip. In another moment she had passed into the post-office and left him alone.

CHAPTER XIII

"ONLY ONE MOB, AIN'T THERE?"

AFTER Miss Wadley had disappeared in the post-office a man touched Roberts on the shoulder.

"Where are the Rangers I sent for?" he asked.

"Here I am, Snark."

"You did n't come alone?"

"Captain Ellison was out of town. The rest of the force was away on assignment. I could n't reach any of 'em."

The deputy sheriff broke out in excited annoyance. "All right! I wash my hands of it. They can lynch the Mexican soon as they've a mind to. Let 'em go to it. Here I send for a company of Rangers, an' one kid shows up. What in Mexico can you do alone?"

"I would n't say alone. You're here, Snark."

"I'm not goin' to lift a hand — not a hand."

"Sure it's necessary? What makes you think they're goin' to lynch Alviro?"

"They don't make any bones of it. Everybody knows it. The Dinsmore gang is in town stirrin' up feelin'. You might as well have stayed away. There's not a thing you can do."

"I reckon mebbe we can figure a way to save Tony," answered the Ranger easily.

The deputy voiced his impatience. "Yore talk

sounds plumb foolish to me. Don't you get it? We're not dealin' with one or two men. Half the town is in this thing."

"I promised Tony there would be nothin' of that sort."

"You can't handle a mob all by yoreself, can you?" asked Snark sarcastically. "There's only one of you, I reckon."

The little flicker in the Ranger's eye was not wholly amusement. "There's goin' to be only one mob, too, ain't there?" he drawled.

"You can't slip him out unnoticed, if that's yore idee. They've got watchers round the jail," the deputy went on.

"I shan't try."

"Then you'll let 'em hang him?"

"Oh, no!"

"What in hell do you mean to do, then?"

Roberts told him, in part. The deputy shook his head vehemently.

"Can't be done. First place, you can't get Wadley to do it. He won't lift a hand to stop this hangin'. Second place, he could n't stop it if he wanted to. Folks in Tascosa ain't a bit gun-shy, an' right now they've got their necks bowed. An' this Dinsmore gang — they'll eat you alive if you get in their way."

"Mebbeso. You can't always be sure. I've got one card up my sleeve I have n't mentioned to you."

"If you want my opinion —"

The Ranger cut him off short. "I don't, Snark. Not right now. I'm too busy to listen to it. I want to know just one thing of you. Will you have the horses right where I want 'em when I want 'em?"

"You're the doc," acknowledged the deputy grudgingly. "They'll be there, but just the same I think it's a fool play. You can't get away with it."

Jack asked a question. "Where am I most likely to find Wadley?"

"At McGuffey's store. It's a block this-a-way and a block that-a-way." He indicated directions with his hand.

Wadley was not among those who sat on the porch of the general store known as McGuffey's Emporium. He had just gone to his sister's house to meet his daughter Ramona, of whose arrival he had received notice by a boy. Roberts followed him.

In answer to the Ranger's "Hello, the house!" the cattleman came out in his shirt-sleeves.

Jack cut straight to business.

"I've come to see you about that Mexican Alviro, Mr. Wadley. Is it true they're goin' to lynch him?"

The hard eyes of the grizzled Texan looked full at Roberts. This young fellow was the one who had beaten his son and later had had the impu-

dence to burn as a spill for a cigarette the hundred-dollar bill he had sent him.

"Whyfor do you ask me about it?" he demanded harshly.

"Because you've got to help me stop this thing."

The cattleman laughed mirthlessly. "They can go as far as they like for me. Suits me fine. Hangin' is too good for him. That's all I've got to say."

Already he had refused the pleadings of his daughter, and he had no intention of letting this young scalawag change his mind.

"Are you sure this Mexican is guilty — sure he's the man who killed yore son, Mr. Wadley?"

"He's as guilty as hell."

"I don't think it. Has n't it ever struck you as strange that yore son was killed an' yore messenger Ridley held up the same night, an' that the two things happened not many miles from each other?"

"Of course it has. I'm no fool. What of it?"

"I've always thought the same men did both."

"Young fellow, have you ever thought that Ridley never was held up, that it was a fake robbery pulled off to deceive me? Where is Ridley? He lit out mighty sudden when he saw how I took it. He could n't even tell me where the hold-up happened. I never did hit the trail of the robbers."

"It was n't a fake. I can prove that."

"I'm here to be shown," said the cattleman skeptically.

"But first about Tony. It looks bad for him on the surface. I'll admit that. But —"

"Don't talk to me about my boy's murderer, Roberts!" cried Wadley, flushing angrily. "I'll not do a thing for him. I'll help those that aim to do justice on him."

"He did n't kill yore son."

"What! Did n't you arrest him yoreself for it?"

"When I arrested him, I did n't believe he had done it. I know it now. He's my star witness, an' I knew he would skip across the border if I let him out."

"You can't convince me, but let's hear yore fairy tale. I got to listen, I reckon."

Jack told his story in few words. He explained what he had found at the scene of the murder and how he had picked up the trail of the three horsemen who had followed Rutherford to the place of his death. He had back-tracked to the camp of the rendezvous at the rim-rock, and he had found there corroborative evidence of the statement Tony Alviro had made to him.

"What was it he told you, and what did you find?"

The big cattleman looked at him with a suspicion that was akin to hostility. His son had

been a ne'er-do-well. In his heart Wadley was not sure he had not been worse. But he was ready to fight at the drop of the hat any man who dared suggest it. He did not want to listen to any evidence that would lead him to believe ill of the son who had gone wrong.

"Tony admits all the evidence against him. He did follow Rutherford intendin' to kill him. But when he saw yore son strike straight across country to the cap-rock, he trailed him to see where he was goin'. Alviro had heard stories."

"You can't tell me anything against my boy. I won't stand for it," broke out the tortured father.

The Ranger looked straight at him. "I'm goin' to tell you no harm of him except that he kept bad company," he said gently. "I reckon you know that already."

"Go on," commanded the father hoarsely.

"Tony followed him to the rim-rock, an' on the way they jumped up the camper, though Alviro did not know it. At the rim-rock Rutherford met two men. Presently another man joined them."

"Who were they?"

"Alviro is n't dead sure. He climbed up to a rock bluff back of them, but it was still dark an' he could n't make them out. Pretty soon Rutherford found out they had a sack of gold. He must have found out where they got it, too."

Underneath the deep tan of his cheeks the old-timer whitened. "So you're tryin' to tell me that my boy was one of the gang that robbed my messenger! An' you're askin' me to believe it on the word of a greaser with a rope around his neck. Is that it?"

"No. They had a quarrel, but yore son bluffed 'em out. They gave the gold to him. He saddled an' rode away with it. On his way back to town he was murdered. So he never got a chance to turn it back to you."

The father of the man who had been killed drew a long, sobbing breath of relief. His clenched fists slowly opened.

"Tony saw all this, did he?"

"Not all of it. Day was comin' on, an' he could n't follow Rutherford right away. Before he got goin' the three men saddled. They trailed along after yore son, an' Tony a mile or so behind 'em. After awhile he heard a shot. He took his time investigatin', because he did n't want to stop any bullets himself. At the foot of Battle Butte he found Rutherford. He had been shot from behind an' flung over the bluff."

The face of the cattleman twitched. "If I can lay my hands on the man or men that did it —"

"Mebbe you can, if you'll give me time. I checked up Tony's story, an' everywhere there was evidence to back it. He had no rifle with him, but I picked up a shell back of some rocks a

hundred yards from where yore son must have been standin' when he was shot. The shell came from a '73. I back-tracked to the night-camp, an' it was just like Tony had said. Four men had been there. One left before the others. You could see the signs where they had trailed him. Once or twice they missed his tracks an' found 'em again. Same way with the single man followin' them. He had taken short-cuts too. Sometimes he blotted out the hoofprints of the three in front, so I know he was not ahead of 'em."

"You think the Dinsmores did this, Jack?"

"I want more evidence before I say so publicly. But Tony did n't. Here's another point in his favor. If Tony shot him on the bluff an' flung the body over, why did he have to go down below an' look at it? No need a-tall of that. No; Tony went down to make sure who it was that had been killed. Soon as he knew that he guessed he would be accused of it, an' he lit out for No Man's Land. I found him there three weeks later."

The cattleman apologized after a fashion for some hard things he had said and thought about his former employee. "I don't spend any of my time likin' yore style, Roberts. You're too high-heeled for me. But I'll say this for you: Ellison picked a good man when he got you. You're a straight-up rider, an' you'll do to take along. What's yore programme?"

He told it. The cattleman looked at him with increased respect. He gave a short, barking laugh.

"If it was anybody else I'd say it was crazy, but you're such a doggoned hellion of a go-getter mebbe you can put it over."

"Looks to me like a good bet," said Roberts mildly.

"Well, I an' my friends will be right there if we're needed. I'll see you through. Can't afford to have my best witness strung up to a wagon-tongue yet awhile."

They talked over the details; then the Ranger started for the jail, and the cattleman breezed around to give a little tip to some reliable friends. Wadley was quite of a mind with Roberts. There was going to be no lynching at Tascosa if he could help it.

CHAPTER XIV

JACK SERVES NOTICE

JACK ROBERTS liked to get his information first hand. On his way to the jail he deflected, passed up the wide, dusty main street, and stopped at a log "hogan" made of *bois d'arc* timber and cedar from the brakes. Across the front of it was printed roughly a sign:

THE SILVER DOLLAR

The Ranger took a little hitch at his guns to make sure they would slide easily from the holsters in case of need, then strolled into the saloon, a picture of negligent indifference.

A tall man, lank as a shad, was master of ceremonies. Steve Gurley was in high feather. He was treating the crowd and was availing himself of his privilege as host to do the bulk of the talking. His theme was the righteousness of mob law, with particular application to the case of Tony Alviro. He talked loudly, as befits one who is a leader of public opinion.

Some wandering of attention in his audience brought him to a pause. He turned, to see the Ranger leaning indolently against the doorjamb. Jack was smiling in the manner of one quietly amused.

"Who invited you here?" demanded Gurley, taken aback, but unwilling to show it.

"Me, I just dropped in to hear yore big talk. Reminds me of old Geronimo. Like you, he gets all filled up with words about every so often and has to steam off. Go ahead, Gurley. Don't let me interrupt you. Make heap oration."

But Gurley's fluency was gone. His cross-eyed glance slid round the room to take stock of his backers. Was this fellow Roberts alone, or had he a dozen Rangers in town with him? He decided to bluff, though with no very great confidence. For into the picture had walked a man, a personality, dynamic and forceful. The outlaw had seen him in action once, and he had been on that occasion as easy to handle as a cageful of panthers.

"Come to see the hangin', have you, Mr. Ranger?"

"Is there goin' to be a hangin'?"

"You betcha — to-night! Git around early, an' you can have a front seat." Gurley added a word of explanation. "No greaser can git biggity an' shoot up our friends without hangin' from the end of a wagon-tongue *pronto.*"

"We'll see what a judge an' jury say about it," suggested the Ranger mildly.

"That so? No brindle-thatched guy in buckskin can interfere without sleepin' in smoke. Understand?" The long, sallow man nervously

stroked his hair, which was flattened down on his forehead in a semicircle in the absurd fashion of the day.

"Don't pull on yore picket-pin, Gurley," observed Roberts. "What I say goes. There's goin' to be no hangin' till the courts say so."

A man had come into the saloon by the back door. He was a heavy-set, slouchy man in jeans, broad-shouldered and bowlegged. He laughed grimly. "I don't reckon you can put that over on folks of the short-grass country, young fellow, me lad. We grow man-size, an' I don't expect we'll ask yore say-so when we're ready for business."

Pete Dinsmore had the advantage of his colleague. He knew that Roberts was the only Ranger in town. Also he was of tougher stuff. The leader of the Dinsmore gang would go through.

Into the gray-blue eye of the young man came a look that chilled. "Dinsmore, I'm not here to get into a rookus with you. But I'll serve notice on you right now to keep yore mind off Alviro. He's in the hands of the Texas Rangers. You know what that means."

Dinsmore met the warning with a sneer. "I was hittin' my heels on this range when you was knee-high to a duck, kid. Don't make a mistake. Folks don't make 'em with me twice." He thrust the head on his bull neck forward and dropped a hand to the gun by his side.

The Ranger shook his head. "Not just now, Pete. You're a bad *hombre;* I know that. Some day we're liable to tangle. But it will be in the way of business. While I'm workin' for the State I've got no private feuds."

Jack turned and walked out of the place as casually as he had entered. He knew now that Snark was right. Tascosa meant to hang the Mexican within a few hours.

Evidently Tony had heard the news. He looked up with quick apprehension when Snark opened the door of his cell to admit the Ranger.

"You promise' me fair trial, *señor.* Yet to-day they mean to hang me. Not so?" he cried. The young Mexican was sweating drops of fear.

"That's why I'm here, Tony," answered Jack cheerfully. "The hangin' programme won't go through if you do exactly as I say. I'll stand by you. They'll not get you unless they get me. Is that fair?"

Confidence is born of confidence. Alviro felt himself buttressed by the quiet strength of this vigorous youth. Broader shoulders than his had assumed the responsibility.

"What is it that I am to do?" he asked, his liquid eyes filled with the dumb worship of a dog.

"You're to walk right beside me. No matter how the crowd presses — no matter what it does — stick right there. If you try to run, you're gone. I can't save you. Understand?"

"*Sí, señor.*"

Roberts looked at his watch. "'Most time for the fireworks to begin. You'll wait here till I come back, Tony. I'm goin' to give a little exhibition first. Be with you *pronto.*"

Little beads of sweat gathered again on the forehead of the prisoner. The palms of his hands were hot and moist. He glanced nervously out of the window. Ten minutes before there had been a few lookouts in sight; now there were a hundred men or more. The mob was beginning to gather for the storming of the sod-house. Soon the affairs of Tony Alviro would reach a crisis.

"I — I'll nev' get out alive," said the Mexican in a dry whisper.

The Ranger grinned at him. "Don't worry. If the luck breaks right we'll camp to-night under the stars. If it does n't they'll bury us both, Tony."

In that smile was life for Alviro. It expressed a soul unperturbed, ready for anything that might come up. With this man beside him Tony felt courage flowing back into his heart.

CHAPTER XV

A CLOSE SHAVE

THE Ranger opened the door of the "soddy," stepped through, and closed it behind him. Jeers, threats, bits of advice greeted him from those in front of the jail.

"Better p'int for the hills, Mr. Ranger." . . . "A whole passel of sheriffs can't save the greaser." . . . "Don't you-all try an' stop us if you know what's good for you." . . . "Skedaddle while yore skin's whole." . . . "It's the Mexican, anyhow; it's him an' you too, if you show fight."

The lean-flanked young Ranger looked them over coolly. Men were coming in driblets from the main street. Already perhaps there were a hundred and fifty men and boys in sight. They were the advance guard of the gathering mob.

Never in his gusty lifetime had Jack Roberts been more master of himself. He had that rare temperament which warms to danger. He stood there bareheaded, his crisp, curly bronze hair reflecting the glow of the setting sun, one hand thrust carelessly into his trousers pocket.

"Give up yore prisoner, an' we won't hurt you. We got nothin' against you," a voice cried.

Jack did not answer. His left hand came out of the pocket bringing with it half a dozen silver

dollars. Simultaneously the nose of his revolver flashed into sight. A dollar went up into the air. The revolver cracked. The coin, struck by the bullet in its descent, was flung aside at an angle. Dollar after dollar went up and was hurled from its course as the weapon barked. Out of six shots the Ranger missed only one.

It was marvelous marksmanship, but it did not in the least cow those who saw the exhibition. They were frontiersmen themselves, many of them crack shots, and they knew that one man could do nothing against several hundred. Their taunts followed Roberts as he stepped back into the sod-house.

Jack reloaded his revolver and joined the Mexican. "All ready, Tony. We're off soon as I've put the cuffs on you," he said briskly.

"Don' handcuff me, *señor*. Give me a gun an' a chance for my life," begged Alviro. He was trembling like an aspen leaf in a summer breeze.

The Ranger shook his head. "No, Tony. If you were n't wearin' cuffs they'd think I meant to turn you loose. You would n't have a chance. I'm the law, an' you're my prisoner. That's goin' to help pull us through. Brace up, boy. I've got an ace up my sleeve you don't know about."

A minute later a great yell of triumph rose in the air. The door of the sod-house had opened, and the Ranger and his prisoner stood in front of it. The mob pushed closer, uncertain as to what

its next move would be. Had Roberts brought out the Mexican with the intention of making a merely formal resistance?

Pete Dinsmore, just arrived on the scene at the head of a group from the saloons, shouldered his way to the front.

"We'll take care of yore prisoner now, Mr. Ranger. Much obliged for savin' us the trouble of tearin' down the soddy," he called jubilantly.

"You got more sense an' less grit than I figured you had," jeered Gurley. "Now light a shuck back to Mobeetie an' write a report on it."

Roberts waited, silent and motionless, for the tumult to die. Only his eyes and his brain were active. Homer Dinsmore was in the crowd, well to the front. So were Jumbo Wilkins, Clint Wadley, and half a dozen other line-riders and cowmen, all grouped together to the left. Fifty yards back of them a group of saddled horses waited.

The shouting spent itself. The motionless figure beside the pallid Mexican excited curiosity. Did he mean to give up his prisoner without a fight? That was not the usual habit of the Texas Ranger.

With his left hand Jack drew from a coat-pocket some dark sticks a few inches long. A second time his six-shooter leaped from its scabbard.

"Look out for his cutter!"[1] yelled Gurley.

[1] In the early days in Texas a revolver was sometimes called a "cutter."

The voice of Wadley boomed out harsh and strong, so that every man present heard what he said. "Gad, he's got dynamite!"

The revolvers of the two Dinsmores were already out. They had moved forward a step or two, crouching warily, eyes narrowed and steady. If this brash young Ranger wanted a fight he could have it on the jump. But at Wadley's shout they stopped abruptly. The owner of the A T O was right. The fool officer had several sticks of dynamite in his hand tied together loosely by a string.

The crowd had been edging forward. There was no break in it now, but one could see a kind of uneasy ripple, almost as though it held its mob breath tensely and waited to see what was to come.

"He's got no fuse!" screamed Gurley.

"Here's my fuse," retorted the Ranger. He held up his revolver so that all could see. "I'm goin' to fling this dynamite at the first man who tries to stop me an' hit it while it's in th air close to his head. Come on, Tony. We're on our way."

He moved slowly forward. The Dinsmores stood fast, but the crowd sagged. As the Ranger got closer there was a sudden break. Men began to scramble for safety.

"Look out, Dinsmore," an excited voice cried. It belonged to Jumbo Wilkins. "He'll blow you to hell an' back."

Both of the Dinsmores had a reputation for gameness in a country where the ordinary citizen was of proved courage. With revolvers or rifles they would have fought against odds, had done it more than once. But dynamite was a weapon to which they were not used. It carried with it the terror of an instant death which would leave them no chance to strike back. Very slowly at first, a step at a time, they gave ground.

Roberts, as he moved with his prisoner, edged toward Wadley and his group. He knew he had won, that the big cattleman and his friends would close behind him in apparent slow pursuit, so adroitly as to form a shield between him and the mob and thus prevent a rifle-shot from cutting him down. The horses were in sight scarce half a hundred yards away.

And in the moment of victory he shaved disaster. From the right there came the pad of light running feet and the rustle of skirts.

"Goddlemighty, it's 'Mona!" cried Wadley, aghast.

It was. Ramona had known that something was in the air when the Ranger and her father held their conference in front of the house. Her aunt had commented on the fact that Clint had taken from the wall a sawed-off shotgun he sometimes carried by his saddle. The girl had waited, desperately anxious, until she could stand suspense no longer. Bareheaded, she had slipped out

of the house and hurried toward the jail in time to see the Ranger facing alone an angry mob. Without thought of danger to herself she had run forward to join him.

Homer Dinsmore gave a whoop of triumph and rushed forward. The Ranger could not play with dynamite when the life of Wadley's daughter was at stake. His brother, Gurley, a dozen others, came close at his heels, just behind Ramona.

The Ranger dropped the black sticks into his pocket and backed away, screening his prisoner as he did so. The ex-Confederate who had come up on the stage was standing beside Wadley. He let out the old yell of his war days and plunged forward.

The Dinsmores bumped into the surprise of their lives. Somehow the man upon whom they had almost laid clutches was out of reach. Between him and them was a line of tough old-timers with drawn guns.

The owner of the A T O handed his sawed-off shotgun to Jumbo Wilkins, caught Ramona round the shoulders with one arm, and ran her hurriedly out of the danger-zone.

Joe Johnston's old trooper pushed the end of his rifle urgently against Homer Dinsmore's ribs. "Doggone it, don't be so rampageous! Keep back ther! This gun 's liable to go off."

"What 's ailin' you?" snarled Gurley. "Ain't you goin' to help us string up the Mexican?"

"No, Steve. Our intentions is otherwise," replied Jumbo with a grin. "An' don't any of you-all come closeter. This sawed-off shotgun of Clint's is loaded with buckshot, an' she spatters all over the State of Texas."

The little posse round the prisoner backed steadily to the left. Not till they were almost at the horses did Dinsmore's mob guess the intentions of the Ranger.

Pete gave a howl of rage and let fly a bullet at Alviro. Before the sound of the shot had died away, the outlaw dropped his revolver with an oath. The accurate answering fire of Roberts had broken his wrist.

"No use, Pete," growled his brother. "They 've got the deadwood on us to-day. But I reckon there are other days comin'."

Homer Dinsmore was right. The mob had melted away like a small snowbank in a hot sun. It was one thing to help lynch a defenseless Mexican; it was quite another to face nine or ten determined men backing the law. Scarce a score of the vigilantes remained, and most of them were looking for a chance to save their faces "without starting anything," as Jumbo put it later.

The lynching-party stood sullenly at a distance and watched the Ranger, his prisoner, and three other men mount the horses. The rest of the posse covered the retreat of the horsemen.

Just before the riders left, Jumbo asked a ques-

tion that had been disturbing him. "Say, Tex, honest Injun, would you 'a' fired off that dynamite if it had come to a showdown?"

Roberts laughed. He drew from his pocket the sticks, tossed them into the air, and took a quick shot with his revolver.

For a moment not a soul in the posse nor one of Dinsmore's watching vigilantes drew a breath. Not one had time to move in self-defense.

The bullet hit its mark. All present saw the little spasmodic jerk of the bundle in the air. But there was no explosion. The dynamite fell harmlessly to the ground.

The old Confederate stepped forward and picked up the bundle. He examined it curiously, then let out a whoop of joyous mirth.

"Nothin' but painted sticks! Son, you're sure a jim-dandy! Take off yore hats, boys, to the man that ran a bluff on the Dinsmore outfit an' made a pair of deuces stick against a royal flush."

He tossed the bits of wood across to Pete Dinsmore, who caught the bundle and looked down at it with a sinister face of evil. This boy had outmaneuvered, outgamed, and outshot him. Dinsmore was a terror in the land, a bad-man known and feared widely. Mothers, when they wanted to frighten their children, warned them to behave, or the Dinsmore gang would get them. Law officers let these outlaws alone on one pretext or another. But lately a company of the Texas

Rangers had moved up into the Panhandle. This young cub had not only thrown down the gauntlet to him; he had wounded him, thwarted him, laughed at him, and made a fool of him. The prestige he had built up so carefully was shaken.

The black eyes of the outlaw blazed in their deep sockets. "By God, young fellow, it's you or me next time we meet. I'll learn you that no scrub Ranger can cross Pete Dinsmore an' get away with it. This ain't the first time you've run on the rope with me. I've had more 'n plenty of you."

The riders were moving away, but Jack Roberts turned in the saddle, one hand on the rump of the bronco.

"It won't be the last time either, Dinsmore. You look like any other cheap cow-thief to me. The Rangers are going to bring law to this country. Tell yore friends they'll live longer if they turn honest men."

The Ranger put spurs to his horse and galloped after his posse.

CHAPTER XVI

WADLEY GOES HOME IN A BUCKBOARD

CLINT WADLEY took his daughter to the end of the street where his sister lived, blowing her up like a Dutch uncle every foot of the way. The thing she had done had violated his sense of the proprieties and he did not hesitate to tell her so. He was the more unrestrained in his scolding because for a few moments his heart had stood still at the danger in which she had placed herself.

"If you was just a little younger I'd sure enough paddle you. Have n't you been brought up a-tall? Did you grow up like Topsy, without any folks? Don't you know better than to mix up in men's affairs an' git yoreself talked about?" he spluttered.

Ramona hung her head and accepted his reproaches humbly. It was easy for her to believe that she had been immodest and forward in her solicitude. Probably Mr. Roberts — and everybody else, for that matter — thought she could not be a nice girl, since she had been so silly.

"You go home an' stay there," continued Clint severely. "Don't you poke yore head outside the door till I come back. I'll not have you traipsing around this-a-way. Hear me, honey?"

"Yes, Dad," she murmured through the tears that were beginning to come.

"I reckon, when it comes to standin' off a crowd o' hoodlums, I don't need any help from a half-grown little squab like you. I been too easy on you. That 's what ails you."

Ramona had not a word to say for herself. She crept into the house and up to her room, flung herself on the bed and burst into a passion of weeping. Why had she made such an exhibition of herself? She was ashamed in every fiber of her being. Not only had she disgraced herself, but also her father and her aunt.

Meanwhile her father was on his way back downtown. In spite of his years the cattleman was hot-headed. He had something to say to Pete Dinsmore. If it led to trouble Wadley would be more than content, for he believed now that the Dinsmore gang — or some one of them acting in behalf of all — had murdered his son, and he would not rest easy until he had avenged the boy.

The Dinsmores were not at the Silver Dollar nor at the Bird Cage. A lounger at the bar of the latter told the owner of the A T O that they had gone to the corral for their horses. He had heard them say they were going to leave town.

The cattleman followed them to the corral they frequented. Pete Dinsmore was saddling his horse in front of the stable. The others were

not in sight, but a stable boy in ragged jeans was working over some harness near the door.

Dinsmore sulkily watched Wadley approach. He was in a sour and sullen rage. One of the privileges of a "bad-man" is to see others step softly and speak humbly in his presence. But to-day a young fellow scarcely out of his teens had made him look like a fool. Until he had killed Roberts, the chief of the outlaws would never be satisfied, nor would his prestige be what it had been. It had been the interference of Wadley and his crowd that had saved the Ranger from him, and he was ready to vent his anger on the cattleman if he found a good chance.

The outlaw knew well enough that he could not afford to quarrel with the owner of the A T O. There was nothing to gain by it and everything to lose, for even if the cattleman should be killed in a fair fight, the Rangers would eventually either shoot the Dinsmores or run them out of the country. But Pete was beyond reason just now. He was like a man with a toothache who grinds on his sore molar in the intensity of his pain.

"I've come to tell you somethin', Dinsmore," said Wadley harshly.

"Come to apologize for throwin' me down, I reckon. You need n't. I 'm through with you."

" I 'm not through with you. What I want to say is that you 're a dog. No, you 're worse than any hound I ever knew; you 're a yellow wolf."

"What 's that?" cried the bad-man, astounded. His uninjured hand crept to a revolver-butt.

"I believe in my soul that you murdered my boy."

"You 're crazy, man — locoed sure enough. The Mexican —"

"Is a witness against you. When you heard that he had followed Ford that night, you got to worryin'. You did n't know how much he had seen. So you decided to play safe an' lynch him, you hellhound."

"Where did you dream that stuff, Wadley?" demanded Dinsmore, eyes narrowed wrathfully.

"I did n't dream it, any more than I dreamed that you followed Ford from the cap-rock where you hole up, an' shot him from behind at Battle Butte."

"That 's war talk, Wadley. I've just got one word to say to it. You 're a liar. Come a-shootin', soon as you 're ready."

"That 's now."

The cattleman reached for his forty-five, but before he could draw, a shot rang out from the corral. Wadley staggered forward a step or two and collapsed.

Pete did not relax his wariness. He knew that one of the gang had shot Wadley, but he did not yet know how badly the man was hurt. From his place behind the horse he took a couple of left-handed shots across the saddle at the helpless

man. The cattleman raised himself on an elbow, but fell back with a grunt.

The position of Dinsmore was an awkward one to fire from. Without lifting his gaze from the victim, he edged slowly round the bronco.

There was a shout of terror, a sudden rush of hurried feet. The stableboy had flung himself down on Wadley in such a way as to protect the prostrate body with his own.

"Git away from there!" ordered the outlaw, his face distorted with the lust for blood that comes to the man-killer.

"No. You've done enough harm. Let him alone!" cried the boy wildly.

The young fellow was gaunt and ragged. A thin beard straggled over the boyish face. The lips were bloodless, and the eyes filled with fear. But he made no move to scramble for safety. It was plain that in spite of his paralyzing horror he meant to stick where he was.

Dinsmore's lip curled cruelly. He hesitated. This boy was the only witness against him. Why not make a clean job of it and wipe him out too? He fired — and missed; Pete was not an expert left-hand shot.

"Look out, Pete. Men comin' down the road," called the other Dinsmore from the gate of the corral.

Pete looked and saw two riders approaching. It was too late now to make sure of Wadley or

to silence the wrangler. He shoved his revolver back into its place and swung to the saddle.

"Was it you shot Wadley?" he asked his brother.

"Yep, an none too soon. He was reachin' for his six-shooter."

"The fool would have it. Come, let 's burn the wind out of here before a crowd gathers."

Gurley and a fourth man joined them. The four galloped down the road and disappeared in a cloud of white dust.

A moment later Jumbo Wilkins descended heavily from his horse. Quint Sullivan, another rider for the A T O, was with him.

The big line-rider knelt beside his employer and examined the wound. "Hit once — in the side," he pronounced.

"Will — will he live?" asked the white-faced stableboy.

"Don't know. But he 's a tough nut, Clint is. He 's liable to be cussin' out the boys again in a month or two."

Wadley opened his eyes. "You 're damn' whistlin', Jumbo. Get me to my sister's."

Quint, a black-haired youth of twenty, gave a repressed whoop. "One li'l' bit of a lead pill can't faze the boss. They took four or five cracks at him an' did n't hit but once. That 's plumb lucky."

"It would 'a' been luckier if they had n't hit

him at all, Quint," answered Jumbo dryly. "You fork yore hawss, son, an' go git Doc Bridgman. An' you — whatever they call you, Mr. Hawss-rustler — harness a team to that buckboard."

Jumbo, with the expertness of an old-timer who had faced emergencies of this kind before, bound up the wound temporarily. The stable-rustler hitched a team, covered the bottom of the buckboard with hay, and helped Wilkins lift the wounded man to it.

Clint grinned faintly at the white-faced boy beside him. A flicker of recognition lighted his eyes. "You look like you'd seen a ghost, Ridley. Close call for both of us, eh? Lucky that Ranger plugged Dinsmore in the shootin' arm. Pete's no two-gun man. Can't shoot for sour apples with his left hand. Kicked up dust all around us, an' did n't score once."

"Quit yore talkin', Clint," ordered Jumbo.

"All right, Doc." The cattleman turned to Ridley. "Run ahead, boy, an' prepare 'Mona so 's she won't be scared plumb to death. Tell her it 's only a triflin' flesh-wound. Keep her busy fixin' up a bed for me — an' bandages. Don't let her worry. See?"

Ridley had come to town only two days before. Ever since the robbery he had kept a lone camp on Turkey Creek. There was plenty of game for the shooting, and in that vast emptiness of space he could nurse his wounded self-respect. But he

had run out of flour and salt. Because Tascosa was farther from the A T O ranch than Clarendon he had chosen it as a point to buy supplies. The owner of the corral had offered him a job, and he had taken it. He had not supposed that Ramona was within a hundred miles of the spot. The last thing in the world he wanted was to meet her, but there was no help for it now.

Her aunt carried to Ramona the word that a man was waiting outside with a message from her father. When she came down the porch steps, there were still traces of tear-stains on her cheeks. In the gathering dusk she did not at first recognize the man at the gate. She moved forward doubtfully, a slip of a slender-limbed girl, full of the unstudied charm and grace of youth.

Halfway down the path she stopped, her heart beating a little faster. Could this wan and ragged man with the unkempt beard be Art Ridley, always so careful of his clothes and his personal appearance? She was a child of impulse. Her sympathy went out to him with a rush, and she streamed down the path to meet him. A strong, warm little hand pressed his. A flash of soft eyes irradiated him. On her lips was the tender smile that told him she was still his friend.

"Where in the world have you been?" she cried. "And what have you been doing to yourself?"

His blood glowed at the sweetness of her generosity.

"I've been — camping."

With the shyness and the boldness of a child she pushed home her friendliness. "Why don't you ever come to see a fellow any more?"

He did not answer that, but plunged at his mission. "Miss Ramona, I've got bad news for you. Your father has been hurt — not very badly, I think. He told me to tell you that the wound was only a slight one."

'Mona went white to the lips. "How?" she whispered.

"The Dinsmores shot him. The men are bringing him here."

He caught her in his arms as she reeled. For a moment her little head lay against his shoulder and her heart beat against his.

"A trifling flesh-wound, your father called it," went on Ridley. "He said you were to get a bed ready for him, and fix bandages."

She steadied herself and beat back the wave of weakness that had swept over her.

"Yes," she said. "I'll tell Aunt. Have they sent for the doctor?"

"Quint Sullivan went."

A wagon creaked. 'Mona flew into the house to tell her aunt, and out again to meet her father. Her little ankles flashed down the road. Agile as a boy, she climbed into the back of the buckboard.

"Oh, Dad!" she cried in a broken little voice,

and her arms went round him in a passion of love.

He was hurt worse than he was willing to admit to her.

"It's all right, honey-bug. Doc Bridgman will fix me up fine. Yore old dad is a mighty live sinner yet."

Ridley helped Jumbo carry the cattleman into the house. As he came out, the doctor passed him going in.

Ridley slipped away in the gathering darkness and disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII

OLD-TIMERS

As soon as Captain Ellison heard of what had happened at Tascosa, he went over on the stage from Mobeetie to look at the situation himself. He dropped in at once to see his old friends the Wadleys. Ramona opened the door to him.

"Uncle Jim!" she cried, and promptly disappeared in his arms for a hug and a kiss.

The Ranger Captain held her off and examined the lovely flushed face.

"Dog it, you get prettier every day you live. I wisht I was thirty years younger. I'd make some of these lads get a move on 'em."

"I wish you were," she laughed. "They need some competition to make them look at me. None of them would have a chance then — even if they wanted it."

"I believe that. I got to believe it to keep my self-respect. It's all the consolation we old-timers have got. How's Clint?"

"Better. You should hear him swear under his breath because the doctor won't let him smoke more than two pipes a day, and because we won't let him eat whatever he wants to. He's worse than a sore bear," said Ramona proudly.

"Lead me to him."

A moment later the Ranger and the cattleman were shaking hands. They had been partners in their youth, had fought side by side in the Civil War, and had shot plains Indians together at Adobe Walls a few years since. They were so close to each other that they could quarrel whenever they chose, which they frequently did.

"How, old-timer!" exclaimed the Ranger Captain.

"Starved to death. They feed me nothin' but slops — soup an' gruel an' custard an' milk-toast. Fine for a full-grown man, ain't it? Jim, you go out an' get me a big steak an' cook it in boilin' grease on a camp-fire, an' I'll give you a deed to the A T O."

"To-morrow, Clint. The Doc says —"

"*Mañana!* That's what they all say. Is this Mexico or God's country? What I want, I want now."

"You always did — an' you 'most always got it too," said Ellison, his eyes twinkling reminiscently.

'Mona shook a warning finger at her father. "Well, he won't get it now. He'll behave, too, or he'll not get his pipe to-night."

The sick man grinned. "See how she bullies a poor old man, Jim. I'm worse than that Lear fellow in the play — most henpecked father you ever did see."

"Will she let you talk?"

"He may talk to you, Uncle Jim."

"What did I tell you?" demanded the big cattleman from the bed with the mock bitterness that was a part of the fun they both enjoyed. "You see, I got to get her permission. I'm a slave."

"That 's what a nurse is for, Clint. You want to be glad you got the sweetest one in Texas." The Captain patted Ramona affectionately on the shoulder before he passed to the business of the day. "I want to know about all these ructions in Tascosa. Tell me the whole story."

They told him. He listened in silence till they had finished, asked a question or two, and made one comment.

"That boy Roberts of mine is sure some go-getter."

"He'll do," conceded the cattleman. "That lucky shot of his — the one that busted Dinsmore's arm — certainly saved my life later."

"Lucky shot!" exploded Ellison. "And you just through tellin' me how he plugged the dollars in the air! Doggone it, I want you to know there was no darned luck about it! My boys are the best shots in Texas."

"I'll take any one of 'em on soon as I'm out — any time, any place, any mark," retorted Wadley promptly.

"I'll go you. Roberts is a new man an' has n't had much experience. I'll match him with you."

"New man! H'mp! He 's the best you 've got, an' you know it."

"I don't know whether he is, but he 's good enough to make any old-timer like you look like a plugged nickel."

The cattleman snorted again, disdaining an answer.

"Dad is the best shot in Texas," pronounced Ramona calmly, rallying to her father's support. For years she had been the umpire between the two.

The Captain threw up his hands. "I give up."

"And Mr. Roberts is just about as good."

"That 's settled, then," said Ellison. "But what I came to say is that I 'm goin' to round up the Dinsmore bunch. We can't convict 'em of murder on the evidence we have, but I 'll arrest 'em for shootin' you an' try to get a confession out of one of 'em. Does that look reasonable, Clint?"

Wadley considered this.

"It 's worth a try-out. The Dinsmores are game. They won't squeal. But I've a sneakin' notion Gurley is yellow. He might come through — or that other fellow Overstreet might. I don't know him. You want to be careful how you try to take that outfit, though, Jim. They 're dangerous as rattlesnakes."

"That 's the kind of outfit my boys eat up," answered the chipper little officer as he rose to leave. "Well, so long, Clint. Behave proper, an'

mebbe this young tyrant will give you a nice stick o' candy for a good boy."

He went out chuckling.

The cattleman snorted. "Beats all how crazy Jim is about those Ranger boys of his. He thinks the sun rises an' sets by them. I want to tell you they've got to sleep on the trail a long time an' get up early in the mo'nin' to catch the Dinsmores in bed. That bird Pete always has one eye open. What's more, he an' his gang wear their guns low."

"I don't think Uncle Jim ought to send boys like Jack Roberts out against such desperadoes. It's not fair," Ramona said decisively.

"Oh, ain't it?" Her father promptly switched to the other side. "You give me a bunch of boys like young Roberts, an' I'd undertake to clean up this whole country, an' Lincoln County too. He's a dead shot. He's an A-1 trailer. He can whip his weight in wildcats. He's got savvy. He uses his brains. An' he's game from the toes up. What more does a man need?"

"I did n't know you liked him," his daughter said innocently.

"Like him? Jumpin' snakes, no! He's too darned fresh to suit me. What's likin' him got to do with it? I'm just tellin' you that no better officer ever stood in shoe-leather."

"Oh, I see."

Ramona said no more. She asked herself no

questions as to the reason, but she knew that her father's words of praise were sweet to hear. They sent a warm glow of pride through her heart. She wanted to think well of this red-haired Ranger who trod the earth as though he were the heir of all the ages. In some strange way Fate had linked his life with hers from that moment when he had literally flung himself in her path to fight a mad bull for her life.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SHOT OUT OF THE NIGHT

RAMONA sat on the porch in the gathering darkness. She had been reading aloud to her father, but he had fallen asleep beside her in his big armchair. During these convalescent days he usually took a nap after dinner and after supper. He called it forty winks, but to an unprejudiced listener the voice of his slumber sounded like a sawmill in action.

The gate clicked, and a man walked up the path. He did not know that the soft eyes of the girl, sitting in the porch shadows, lit with pleasure at sight of him. Nothing in her voice or in her greeting told him so.

He took off his hat and stood awkwardly with one booted foot on the lowest step.

"I came to see Mr. Wadley," he presently explained, unaccountably short of small talk.

She looked at her father and laughed. The saw was ripping through a series of knots in alternate crescendo and diminuendo. "Shall I wake him? He likes to sleep after eating. I think it does him good."

"Don't you! I'll come some other time."

"Could n't you wait a little? He does n't usually sleep long." The girl suggested it hospitably.

His embarrassment relieved any she might otherwise have felt.

"I reckon not."

At the end of that simple sentence he stuck, and because of it Jack Roberts blushed. It was absurd. There was no sense in it, he told himself. It never troubled him to meet men. He had n't felt any shyness when there had been a chance to function in action for her. But now he was all feet and hands before this slip of a girl. Was it because of that day when she had come flying between him and the guns of Dinsmore's lynching-party? He wanted to thank her, to tell her how deeply grateful he had been for the thought that had inspired her impulse. Instead of which he was, he did not forget to remind himself later, as expressive as a bump on a log.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Ridley?" she asked.

"No, miss. He saved yore father's life from Pete Dinsmore. I reckon you know that."

"Yes. I saw him for a moment. Poor boy! I think he is worrying himself sick. If you meet him will you tell him that everything 's all right. Dad would like to see him."

Their voices had dropped a note in order not to waken her father. For the same reason she had come down the steps and was moving with him toward the gate.

If Jack had known how to say good-bye they

would probably have parted at the fence, but he was not socially adequate for the business of turning his back gracefully on a young woman and walking away. As he backed from her he blurted out what was in his mind

"I gotta thank you for — for buttin' in the other day, Miss Ramona."

She laughed, quite at her ease now. Why is it that the most tender-hearted young women like to see big two-fisted men afraid of them?

"Oh, you thought I was buttin' in," she mocked, tilting a gay challenge of the eyes at him.

"I roped the wrong word, miss. I — I thought —"

What he thought was never a matter of record. She had followed him along the fence to complete his discomfiture and to enjoy her power to turn him from an efficient man into a bashful hobbledehoy.

"Father gave me an awful scolding. He said I did n't act like a lady."

"He 's 'way off," differed Jack hotly.

She shook her head. "No. You see I could n't explain to everybody there that I did it for — for Rutherford — because I did n't want anything so dreadful as that poor Mexican's death on his account. Dad said some of the men might think I did it — oh, just to be showing off," she finished untruthfully.

"Nobody would think that — nobody but a plumb idjit. I think you did fine."

Having explained satisfactorily that she had not interfered for his sake, there was really no occasion for Ramona to linger. But Jack had found his tongue at last and the minutes slipped away.

A sound in the brush on the far side of the road brought the Ranger to attention. It was the breaking of a twig. The foot that crushed it might belong to a cow or a horse. But Roberts took no chances. If some one was lying in wait, it was probably to get him.

"Turn round an' walk to the house," he ordered the girl crisply. "Sing 'Swanee River' as you go. Quick!"

There was a note in his voice that called for obedience. Ramona turned, a flurry of fear in her heart. She did not know what there was to be afraid of, but she was quite sure her companion had his reason. The words of the old plantation song trembled from her lips into the night.

A dozen yards behind her Jack followed, backing toward the house. His six-shooter was in his hand, close to his side.

He flashed one look backward. The parlor was lit up and Clint Wadley was lying on a lounge reading a paper. He was a tempting mark for anybody with a grudge against him.

Jack took the last twenty yards on the run. He plunged into the parlor on the heels of Ramona.

Simultaneously came the sound of a shot and of breaking glass. Wadley jumped up, in time to see the Ranger blow out the lamp. Jack caught Ramona by the shoulders and thrust her down to her knees in a corner of the room.

"What in blue blazes —?" Clint began to demand angrily.

"Keep still," interrupted Jack. "Some one's bushwhackin' either you or me."

He crept to the window and drew down the blind. A small hole showed where the bullet had gone through the window and left behind it a star of shattered glass.

Ramona began to whimper. Her father's arm found and encircled her. "It's all right, honey. He can't git us now."

"I'm goin' out by the back door. Mebbe I can put salt on this bird's tail," said Jack. "You stay right where you are, Mr. Wadley. They can't hit either of you in that corner."

"Oh, don't! Please don't go!" wailed the girl.

Her words were a fillip to the Ranger. They sent a glow through his blood. He knew that at that moment she was not thinking of the danger to herself.

"Don't you worry. I'll swing round on him wide. Ten to one he's already hittin' the dust fast to make his get-away."

He slipped out of the room and out of the

house. So slowly did he move that it was more than an hour before he returned to them.

"I guessed right," he told the cattleman. "The fellow hit it up at a gallop through the brush. He 's ten miles from here now."

"Was he after me or you?"

"Probably me. The Rangers ain't popular with some citizens. Looks to me like Steve Gurley's work."

"I would n't be a Ranger if I was you. I'd resign," said Ramona impulsively.

"Would you?" Jack glanced humorously at Wadley. "I don't expect yore father would indorse them sentiments, Miss Ramona. He'd tell me to go through."

Clint nodded. " 'Mona said you wanted to see me about somethin'."

The young man showed a little embarrassment. The cattleman guessed the reason. He turned to his daughter.

"Private business, honey."

Ramona kissed her father good-night and shook hands with Jack. When they were alone the Ranger mentioned the reason for his call.

"It 's goin' around that Pete Dinsmore claims to have somethin' on Rutherford. The story is that he says you 'd better lay off him or he 'll tell what he knows."

The eyes of the cattleman winced. Otherwise he gave no sign of distress.

"I've got to stand the gaff, Jack. He can't blackmail me, even if the hound cooks up some infernal story about Ford. I hate it most on 'Mona's account. It'll hurt the little girl like sixty."

Jack was of that opinion too, but he knew that Wadley's decision not to throw his influence to shield the Dinsmores was the right one.

"She thought a heap o' Ford, 'Mona did," the cattleman went on. "He was all she had except me. The boy was wild. Most young colts are. My fault. I made things too easy for him — gave him too much money to spend. But outside of bein' wild he was all right. I'd hate to have her hear anything against him." He sighed. "Well, I reckon what must be must."

"Stories the Dinsmores tell won't count with honest folks. Pete is one bad *hombre*. Everybody will know why he talks — if he does. That's a big *if* too. He knows we've got evidence to tie his gang up with the killin' of Ford. He does n't know how much. Consequence is he 'll not want to raise any question about the boy. We might come back at him too strong."

"Mebbeso." Wadley looked at the Ranger and his gaze appraised Roberts a man among men. He wished that he had been given a son like this. "Boy, you kept yore wits fine to-night. That idea of makin' 'Mona walk alone to the house an' keepin' her singin' so 's a bushwhacker could n't

make any mistake an' think she was a man was a jim-dandy."

The Ranger rose. He had not the same difficulty in parting from Wadley or any other man that he found in making his adieux to a woman. He simply reached for his hat, nodded almost imperceptibly, and walked out of the house.

CHAPTER XIX

TRAPPED

THE territory which Captain Ellison had to cover to find the Dinsmore gang was as large as Maine. Over this country the buffalo-hunter had come and gone; the cattleman was coming and intended to stay. Large stretches of it were entirely uninhabited; here and there sod or adobe houses marked where hardy ranchers had located on the creeks; and in a few places small settlements dotted the vast prairies.

There were in those days three towns in the Panhandle. If you draw a line due east from Tascosa, it will pass very close to Mobeetie, a hundred miles away. Clarendon is farther to the south. In the seventies Amarillo was only what Jumbo Wilkins would have called "a whistlin'-post in the desert," a place where team outfits camped because water was handy. The official capital of the Panhandle was Mobeetie, the seat of government of Wheeler County, to which were attached for judicial purposes more than a score of other counties not yet organized or even peopled.

To the towns of the Panhandle were drifting in cowboys, freighters, merchants, gamblers, cattle outfits, and a few rustlers from Colorado, New

Mexico, and the more settled parts of Texas. They were the hardier sons of an adventurous race, for each man had to make good his footing by his own strength. At first there had been no law except that which lay in the good-will of men, and the holster by their side. The sheriff of Wheeler County had neither the deputies nor the financial backing to carry justice into the mesquite. Game gunmen served as marshals in the towns, but these had no authority on the plains. Until Captain Ellison and his little company of Rangers moved into the district there had been no way of taking law into the chaparral. The coming of these quiet men in buckskin was notice to the bad-man that murder and robbery were not merely pleasant pastimes.

Yet it would be easy to overstate the lawlessness of the Panhandle. There were bad men. Every frontier of civilization has them. But of all the great cattle country which stretched from Mexico to the Canadian line none had a finer or more orderly citizenry than this. The country was notably free of the bloodshed which drenched such places as Dodge City to the east or Lincoln County, New Mexico, to the west of the Panhandle.

Ellison wanted the Dinsmores, not because he believed he could yet hang any serious crime on them but for the moral effect upon them and the community. Clint Wadley had gone looking for

trouble and had been wounded in consequence. No Texas jury would convict on that count. But it was not a conviction the fire-eating little Captain wanted just now. He intended to show that his boys could go out and arrest the Dinsmores or any other lawbreakers, whenever the occasion called for it. It might take them a week or a month or six months, but they would bag their game in the end. The rule of the Texas Rangers was to sleep on a man's trail until they found him.

The Captain stationed a man at each of the three towns. He sent two on a scouting-trip through No Man's Land, and two more to search Palo Duro Cañon. He watched the stages as they went and came, questioned mule-skinners with freight outfits, kept an eye on *tendejóns* and feed-corrals. And at the end of three weeks he had no results whatever to show, except a sarcastic note from Pete Dinsmore complimenting him on his force of Rangers.

The Captain was furious, but not a whit discouraged.

"Dog it, we'll fight it out on this line if it takes all summer," he told Lieutenant Hawley, his second in command.

To them came Jack Roberts with a proposition. "I've found out that Homer Dinsmore has a girl in Tascosa. She's a Mexican. I know about her through Tony Alviro. It seems she's a cousin of

Bonita, the girl Tony is going to marry. About once a week Dinsmore rides into town at night, ties his horse in the brush back of her house, and goes in to see her. If you say so, Chief, I'll make it my business to be there when he comes."

"Need any help, do you reckon?"

"No. I'll have to hide out in the mesquite. One man will be better on that job than two."

"All right, son. You know yore job. Get him."

That was all the warrant Jack wanted or needed. He returned to Tascosa and made his preparations.

Every night after dark he slipped out of town by the north road till he was on the open prairie, then swung round in a semicircle skirting the lights of the settlement. He had arranged a blind in the brush from which he could see the back of the Menendez "soddy." Occasionally he comforted himself with a cautiously smoked cigarette, but mostly he lay patiently watching the trap that was to lure his prey. At one o'clock each morning he rose, returned on his beat, went to bed, and fell instantly asleep.

On the fifth night there was a variation of the programme.

It was between nine and ten o'clock that Jack heard the hoot of an owl. He sat up instantly, eyes and ears keyed for action.

The back door of the sod-house opened, and through the night stillness floated the faint strum-

ming of a guitar. Jack did not doubt that it was the answering signal to show that all was safe.

A man crept forward from the mesquite and disappeared inside the house.

Through the brush the Ranger snaked his way to the point from which the hooting of the owl had come. A bronco was tethered to a bush. An examination showed that the horse had been ridden far, but not too fast.

Jack was satisfied the man had come alone.

A faint trail wound in and out among the mesquite and the cactus to the house. Beside this trail, behind a clump of prickly pear, the Ranger sat down and waited. The hour-hand of his watch crept to ten, to eleven, to twelve. Roberts rose occasionally, stretched himself to avoid any chance of cramped muscles, and counted stars by way of entertainment. He had spent more diverting evenings, but there was a good chance that the fag end of this one would be lively enough to compensate.

Shortly after midnight a shaft of light reached out from the house into the desert. The back door had opened. A woman came out, took a few steps forward, peered about her, and called that all was clear. A man followed. The two stood talking for a minute in low tones; then the man kissed her and turned briskly toward the brush. According to the Ranger's programme the girl should have returned to the house, but instead she waited in

the moonlight to see the last of her lover. When he waved an arm to her and cried "*Buenas noches, chachita,*" she threw him a kiss across the starlit prairie.

Intent on his good-night, the man missed the ill-defined trail that led to his horse and zigzagged through the brush at another angle. The Ranger, light-footed as a cat, moved forward noiselessly to intercept him, crouching low and taking advantage of all the cover he could find. Luck was with him. Dinsmore strode within a yard of the kneeling man without a suspicion of danger.

A powerful forearm slid out from the brush. Sinewy fingers caught the far ankle of the moving man. One strong pull sent Dinsmore off his balance. The outlaw clutched wildly at the air and came crashing down. He fell into a bush of catclaw cactus.

The Ranger was on him like a wildcat. Before his victim could make a move to defend himself, Jack had the man handcuffed with his arms behind him.

Dinsmore, his face in the catclaw, gave a smothered cry for help. From where he was, the Ranger could not see the house, but he heard the excited voice of the woman, the sound of a commotion, and the beat of rapid footsteps.

An excited voice called: "*Quién es?*"

The trapped man wanted to explain, but his

captor rubbed the face of the outlaw deeper into the torturing spines of the cactus.

"Don't ask any questions," advised Roberts. "Get back into the house *pronto*. The Rangers have taken Dinsmore. Unless you're lookin' for trouble, you'd better *vamos*."

Evidently two or three Mexicans had run out to the rescue. Jack could hear them discussing the situation in whispers. He had them at a double disadvantage. They did not know how many Rangers lay in the mesquite; nor did they want to fall foul of them in any case. The men drew back slowly, still in excited talk among themselves, and disappeared inside the house. The woman protested volubly and bitterly till the closing of the door stifled her voice.

Jack pulled his prisoner to a more comfortable position.

"Sorry you fell into the catclaw, Dinsmore," he said. "If you'll stand hitched, I'll draw the spine from your face."

The man cursed him savagely.

"All right," said the Ranger amiably. "If you want 'em as souvenirs, I'll not object. Suits me if it does you. We'll go now."

He tied to the handcuffs the end of the lariat which was attached to the saddle. The other end he fastened to the pommel.

"I'll not go a step with you," growled Dinsmore.

"Oh, yes, you'd better step along. I'd hate to have to drag you through this brush. It's some rough."

The Ranger swung to the saddle. The bronco answered the pressure of the rider's knee and began to move. The lariat jerked tight. Sullenly Dinsmore yielded.

But his spirit was unbroken. As he stumbled along in front of the horse, he filled the night with raucous oaths.

"Take these cuffs off'n me and come down from that horse," he stormed. "Do that, and I'll beat off yore head."

The man on horseback smiled. "You're the laziest fellow I ever did see, Dinsmore," he drawled. "The last fellow that licked me pulled me from the saddle."

"Just let me get a lick at you," pleaded the outlaw. "I'll give you that bronc you're ridin' if you'll stand up to me man to man."

"Can't do it. I'm here for business an' not for pleasure. Sorry."

"You've got no right to arrest me. What's the charge?"

"I've forgot whether it's brand-burning, highway robbery, murder, or mayhem — any old crime would fit you."

"You've got no evidence."

"Mebbeso, mebbe not," answered the Ranger lightly. "Cap Ellison said he'd like to have a

squint at you, anyhow, so I said I'd fetch you along. No trouble a-tall to show goods."

The outlaw bared his tobacco-stained teeth in a sudden fury of rage. "Some day I'll gun you right for this."

The narrow-loined youth with the well-packed shoulders looked down at him, and the eyes of the officer were hard and steady as steel.

"Dinsmore," he said, "we're goin' to put you an' yore outfit out o' business in the Panhandle. Your day is done. You've run on the rope long enough. I'll live to see you hanged — an' soon."

CHAPTER XX

KIOWAS ON THE WARPATH

JACK ROBERTS did not leave town inconspicuously with his prisoner in the middle of the night. He made instead a public exit, for Captain Ellison wanted to show the Panhandle that the law could reach out and get the Dinsmores just as it could any other criminals. With his handcuffed captive on a horse beside him, the Ranger rode down to the post-office just before the stage left. Already the word had spread that one of the Dinsmores had been taken by an officer. Now the town gathered to see the notorious "bad-man" and his tamer.

Dinsmore faced the curious crowd with a defiant sneer, but he was burning with rage and humiliation. He and his crowd had carried things with a high hand. They were not only outlaws; they were "bad-men" in the frontier sense of the word. They had shot down turbulent citizens who disputed their sway. Pete and Homer especially had won reputations as killers, and game men sidestepped them rather than deny their claims. Yet twice within a month this smooth-faced boy had crossed their path and bested them. The pride of Homer Dinsmore was galled to the quick. He would have given all he had to

"get a lick at" the Ranger now before all these people.

Tascosa watched the young officer and his captive from a distance. The townsfolk offered no audible comment on the situation, either by way of approval or disapproval. The fear of the outlaws had been too long over them. This was not the end of the matter. It was still a good betting proposition that some one of the gang would "get" this jaunty youth before he was much older.

But it is certain that the arrest he had made single-handed had its effect. It is inevitable that a frontier camp shall some day discard its wild youth and put on the sobriety of a settled community. Was this time at hand for the Panhandle?

A rider galloped out of town after the horsemen. The Ranger turned to face him and made sure that the rifle beneath his leg would slip easily from its scabbard. An attempt at a rescue was always a possibility on the cards.

The man drew his cow-pony up beside them.

"'Evenin', Mr. Man-in-a-Hurry. Lookin' for anybody in particular?" asked the red-haired Ranger, his chill eyes fixed on the stranger.

"For you. I want to help guard your prisoner to Mobeetie."

"Much obliged," answered Roberts dryly. "Am I needin' help?"

"You may. You've got to sleep. Let me ride with you."

The brain of Jack Roberts began to register a memory. This young fellow was in ragged jeans and a butternut shirt. His hair was long and unkempt. He looked haggard and ill-fed. But he was the same youth the Ranger had glimpsed for a moment in the bravery of fine clothes and gay address on the day of the bulldogging. Jack remembered his promise to Ramona Wadley.

"Fine! Come along. We'll take watch and watch through the night," he told the boy.

Homer Dinsmore's teeth drew back in a derisive snarl. "Want company again on the trip so 's you won't be robbed, Mr. Ridley?"

The Easterner did not answer, but color flushed his face at the taunt.

Roberts offered a comment on his behalf:

"Ridley was young then. He 's gettin' older every day. I notice he did n't ask for company when he flung himself down over Clint Wadley's body to protect it from the bullets of a killer."

All afternoon they followed the Canadian River as it wound to the east. They made camp beside it at night, cooking the coffee on a fire of buffalo chips. Jerked beef and hardtack, washed down with coffee, was their fare.

Dinsmore had fallen into a sullen silence, but the other two carried on desultory talk. The two young fellows were not very comfortable in each

other's society; they did not understand the mental habits of each other. But Jack maintained a cheerful friendliness to which Arthur responded gratefully. Behind the curtain of their talk was a girl. The spell of her was on them both. Each of them could see her in the coals of the fire, light-footed and slim, with shy eyes tender and shining. But neither of them drew the curtain to their deeper thoughts.

After they had eaten, the Ranger handcuffed his prisoner and pegged him down loosely. He put out the fire, for he did not want the location of the camp to be betrayed by smoke. He gave Ridley the first watch — because it was the easier of the two. With a saddle for a pillow and a slicker for a blanket, he lay down beneath the stars and fell asleep. Once, in his dreams, he thought he heard the sound of beating drums. When he wakened at the time set, the night was still. The prisoner was sound asleep, and Ridley, propped against his saddle, was keeping vigilant watch.

Robert mentioned his fancy about the drums.

Arthur smiled. "Before Dinsmore turned over he was snoring like a far-away thunder-storm. I expect that 's what you heard."

Jack roused the others as soon as the promise of day was in the sky. By sunup they were ready to travel.

There was a bluff back of the camp that gave an outlook over the country. The Ranger left his

prisoner in the care of Arthur while he climbed to its summit for a glance up and down the river. He knew that the Mexican girl would get word to the friends of her sweetheart that he had been arrested. There was a chance that they might already be close. Anyhow, it would do no harm to see. If he had not taken that precaution undoubtedly all three of the party would have been dead inside of half an hour.

For the first sweeping glance of the Ranger showed him a tragedy. The valley was filled with Indians. Apparently as yet they did not know that any white men were in the neighborhood, for the smoke was beginning to rise from morning fires. In a little pocket, just off from the camp, their ponies were herded. At the opposite side were a dozen ox-wagons grouped together in a circle to form a corral. The tongue of the nearest wagon was propped up by a yoke, and across it was the naked body of a man who had been crucified and tortured. The other drivers of the freight outfit were nowhere in sight. Either they were lying dead behind the wagons, or they had escaped on horseback.

The Ranger drew back at once from the bluff. He knew that probably he had been seen by the Indian lookouts; if he and his party were going to get away, it must be done quickly. He ran down the hill to his companions.

"Indians — Kiowas — hundreds of them," he

explained. "They've captured a freight outfit and killed the drivers. We'll cross the river below their camp if we can." As he spoke, he was busy unlocking the handcuffs of the prisoner. To Dinsmore he gave a revolver.

It seemed to Ridley that his heart was pumping water. Death with torture was the punishment given captives by the plains Indians. He knew he must be ghastly white, but he said nothing.

The three men rode out of the ravine to the river. Already they could hear the yelling of the Kiowas a few hundred yards above. A moment later they caught sight of the savages pouring down the bank. Those in front were on foot. Others farther back, on the round-bellied Indian ponies, were galloping to catch up.

Half a mile farther down, there was a break in the river-bank which offered a better chance for crossing. The stream there broadened, cut in two by a little island. The three riders gained on their pursuers. Bullets whistled past them, but they did not stop to exchange shots. When they reached the place Jack had chosen to cross, they were four or five hundred yards ahead of the leading Indians.

They splashed into the water. Here it was shallow, but along the edge of the island the current was running swift. The Kiowas, following the fugitives down the bank, kept up a scattering fire.

The bullets struck the water on all sides of the three moving targets. Arthur was on the right, closest to the Indians. A little ahead of him was Dinsmore. Farther over, the Ranger's horse was already breasting the deep water.

Roberts heard young Ridley cry: "He's hit!"

The Ranger turned his head. His prisoner was sagging in the saddle. Arthur was riding beside the wounded man and trying to support him.

Jack drew up his horse, holding it strongly against the current, until the others were abreast of him.

"We've got to swim for it," he called across to Ridley. "I'll get him if he slips out of the saddle before we reach shore."

The horses swam side by side. Roberts encouraged Dinsmore, riding knee to knee with him. "Just a little way now. Stick it out.... We're right close to the bank.... Grab the horn tight."

As Dinsmore slid into the water Jack caught him by the hair of the head. The swift water, racing fast round the shoulder of the island, tugged mightily at him. But the body of the Ranger's horse was a barrier to keep the unconscious man from being swept downstream, and the fingers of the rider clung to the thick black hair like steel clamps.

They reached shallow water. The Ranger swung from the saddle and carried Dinsmore up through

the thicket that edged the bank. The horses clambered up without guidance, and Ridley drove them into the big rocks, where they would be better protected from the shots of the Indians.

The Ranger chose the best cover available near the head of the island and put the wounded man down gently on the ground. Already the Kiowas were halfway across the river. Jack counted twenty of them on horseback in the water.

"Can you shoot?" he asked his companion.

Ridley was behind a rock around which bushes grew thick. "B-better than I could." He was shaking with excitement.

"You can't miss 'em. We've got 'em right this time."

Jack fired. An Indian plunged headfirst into the water like a stone from a sling. A moment later his body could be seen swirling in the swift current. A second shot shook the death scream from the throat of another brave.

Twice Arthur missed.

"You've got buck-fever. Try for the horses," suggested the Texan. A moment later he gave a little whoop of encouragement. The naked shining body of a Kiowa had collapsed on the bare back of a pony. Ridley at last had scored.

Instantly the nervousness of the Easterner disappeared. His shooting had not the deadly accuracy of Roberts, but he was a good marks-

man, and at this close-range work his forty-five-seventy did clean work.

The Texan did not miss a shot. He picked the leaders and took his time. A third, a fourth, and a fifth brave went sliding from the backs of the swimming ponies.

The Kiowas broke under the deadly fire. Those not yet in the deep water turned and made for the shore from which they had come. The others gave with the current and drifted past the island, their bodies hanging from the far side of the ponies.

The whites on the island shot at the horses. More than one redskin, unable to get out of the current after his pony had been shot, floated down the river for miles before the body was found by his tribe.

"We got either nine or ten," said the Ranger. "They'll never try another attack from that bank. Probably they'll surround the island to starve us."

He put down his rifle and opened the shirt of the wounded man. Dinsmore had been shot in the back, above the heart. Jack washed out the wound and bound it up as best he could. The outlaw might live, or he might not — assuming that the party would escape from the savages.

Jack knew that this was an assumption not likely to be fulfilled. His guess was that there were four or five hundred of the Kiowas. They would

immediately post a line of guards on both sides of the river. There was a chance that a man on a fast horse might make a get-away if he left at once. He proposed to Ridley that he try this.

"Will you go too?" asked Arthur.

The Ranger shook his head. "Got to stay with my prisoner."

"I'll stay too."

"If you were to make it, you could send me help."

"Think I could get away?"

The Westerner pointed to two Indians who were swimming the river below out of rifle-shot. "I doubt it. You might fight yore way through, but they'd likely get you."

"I'll stick it out here, then."

In his heart Arthur knew that he was not staying to face the danger with the Texan. When once he had got over his panic, he had fought coolly enough under the eye of his companion, but he lacked the stark courage to face the chances of that long ride alone for help.

"I reckon it's too late, anyhow," agreed Roberts. He shrugged his shoulders. "It 's a toss-up, either way. But we'll sure send a few to their happy hunting-grounds before we take our long journey."

"You think —" Arthur let his fear-filled eyes finish the question.

The Ranger smiled wryly. "Yore guess is as

good as mine. I'll say this: I've been in tight holes before an' came through O. K. I'll back my luck to stand up this time too."

Arthur looked into the brown face of this spare, clear-eyed youth and felt that he would give his hopes of heaven for such gameness. They had not one chance in ten thousand to escape, but the sheer nerve of the boy held him as cool and easy as though he were sauntering down the main street at Clarendon.

CHAPTER XXI

TEX TAKES A LONG WALK

EXCEPT for desultory firing the Kiowas left the islanders alone for the rest of the day. The fever of the wounded man mounted. Most of the time he was out of his head, and in tossing to and fro was continually disturbing the cold-water bandages applied by the Texan.

As soon as night had fallen, Roberts put a proposition to his companion. "One of us has got to go for help. Take yore choice, Ridley. Will you go or stay?"

The Easterner felt as though his heart had been drenched in ice-water. "Can't we wait until some one comes?" he asked timidly.

"Who's likely to come? You got any friends on the way? I have n't. There's another thing: the stage will be along to-morrow. We've got to get warnin' to it that the Kiowas are on the war-path. If we don't — well, you know what happened to the freight outfit."

"If one of us goes, how can he get away?"

"I've thought of that. It will be dark for an hour before the moon gets up. The one that goes will have to drop off the bank an' swim down with the current for a quarter of a mile or so, then get to the shore, crawl across the prairie till

he 's clear of the sentries, an' make a bee-line for Tascosa."

"I could n't find my way in the dark," faltered Arthur.

Jack nodded. "I doubt if you could. I'm elected, then."

"Why — why can't we both go?"

"We could n't take Dinsmore fifty yards. He 's too sick a man."

"He 's going to die anyhow. If I stay, we 'll both die — horribly. It 's every man for himself now."

Jack shook his head. "If you feel that way, you go an' I'll stay."

"I — I can't go alone." He pushed his plea one step farther. "He 's a criminal — a murderer. He'd kill you if he could, and he 's already betrayed me. There 's no call for us to wait for certain death on his account."

The Ranger spoke gently. "None for you, but he 's in my hands. I'll see it out. Mebbe you can get through the lines. Crawl through the grass. Keep yore nerve an' lie low if you hear 'em comin'. Once you 're through, you 'll be all right."

"I tell you I can't go alone. If it has to be that one goes and one stays, then I 'll stay."

"That 's how it has to be. It 's about an even break, I reckon. They 're liable to get me if I go. They 're liable to get you if you stay. Then again, they 're liable to get neither of us if I can get through."

"What if they rush me?"

"Don't lose yore head. You can stand 'em off. They'll never make as strong an attack as they did this mo'nin'. If they make any real rush, it will likely be just before daybreak. Indians don't do business at night."

Jack made his preparations swiftly. He took off his boots and tied them to his belt. His hat he left behind.

"How will I know whether you get through the sentries?" asked Ridley.

"If you hear any shootin', you'll know I probably did n't. But I'm sure figurin' on gettin' through. Don't you forget for a minute that every hour brings help nearer. So long, old man. Best of luck!"

The Ranger grinned cheerfully at the other boy as he crept into the brush at the edge of the water. Presently Arthur heard a faint *plop* and knew that the Texan had begun his journey.

The swift current carried the swimmer downstream rapidly. He used his arms just enough to keep himself up, and let the power of the water do the rest. As a small boy he had lived on the Brazos. He knew the tricks of the expert, so that he was able now to swim with only his nose showing. For it was certain that the Indians had set watchers on the river to guard against an escape.

The island vanished behind him. Now and then he caught from one bank or the other the

glow of camp-fires. Once he was sure he heard the beating of a tom-tom.

And once he gave himself up for lost. The rapid current had swept him close to the right bank. Across his vision flashed a picture of a brave armed with bow and arrow standing above him on the shore. He dived instantly. When he came up for air, only a bit of his red topknot showed. The swimmer heard the twang of an arrow and dived a second time. He was in the deep shadows of overhanging brush when he shook the water out of his eyes next time. For a dozen seconds he drew his breath in fear. But there came no shout of warning to other watchers, no shot or outcry to shatter the stillness. He guessed that the Kiowa had taken him for a log drifting downstream and had aimed wantonly to test his accuracy.

Several hundred yards below the island Jack caught at a bush projecting into the water. He swung close to the bank and very cautiously drew himself out of the river.

He listened. Except for the sound of the rushing water the night was still. Very carefully he wormed his way forward into the prairie. His progress was slow, for he had to make sure of each foot of his advance. Under cover of a mesquite-bush he put on his water-soaked boots. He crept fifty yards — one hundred. To his right a camp-fire was burning. It seemed to him once or twice that he heard voices.

An old trail worn nearly a foot deep by buffaloes served his need. In this trench he was partly hidden and could make better progress. He traveled on all fours, still alert in every sense for danger.

Suddenly he sank full length into the trench. On the other side of a cactus-bush two Indians were squatting. They sat and talked.

The heart of the Ranger sank. At any moment they might discover his presence, or they might sit there the whole night and hold him prisoner in his ditch.

For an hour he lay there, wondering each moment whether the ticking of his watch might not betray him. Then, in a leisurely way, the sentries got up and sauntered toward the river. The moon was up now, and he could see their naked bodies shining in the light.

The two Kiowas stopped a moment on the bank and talked before they separated. One moved up the river; the other turned and came back directly toward Roberts. The Ranger lay in the buffalo-trail hoping that in the darkness he might escape observation. He was helpless. Even if he had brought a gun with him he dared not shoot, for if the alarm were given he would be driven out of cover in a few minutes.

The brave came forward to the very edge of the wallow. His moccasin touched the body of the prostrate man. Some slight shift of his atti-

tude precipitated the crisis. He turned to listen to some sound, and his foot pressed upon the leg of the Ranger.

There was an instant volcanic upheaval. The Indian, startled, leaped back. Jack was upon him like a wildcat. They struggled, their bodies so close that the Kiowa could not use his rifle. The Texan had a double advantage, that of surprise and of a more muscular body. Moreover, the redskin made the mistake of trying to cling to his gun. He was flung down to the ground hard, the white man on top of him.

Jack became aware that the Indian was going to shout, and knew that if he did all was lost. His strong, brown fingers closed on the throat of the brave. There was a wild thrashing of limbs in a struggle to escape. The grip tightened, cut off a gurgle of escaping air. The naked arms and legs jerked more feebly. . . .

When Roberts crept away into the darkness he carried with him the knife of the Kiowa. The rifle would only have hampered him, since he had to travel fast and light.

With every yard gained now he was nearer safety. He knew he was leaving the camp behind. Presently he rose to his feet and traveled faster. For the safety of the two on the island depended upon the speed with which he covered the distance between him and Tascosa.

The plainsman seldom walks. His high-heeled

boots would be torture on a long tramp. When he wants to reach a place, he rides on horseback. Jack had not walked five miles at a time within a dozen years. Now his long legs reached for the ground in a steady stride that ate up the leagues. He guided his course by the stars until he struck the river far above the camp. Once he stopped for a drink, but the thought of Ridley on the island drove his tired limbs on. Heel and toe, heel and toe, the steady march continued, till the Ranger, lithe and strong though the wind and sun and outdoor life had made him, was ready to drop with fatigue. His feet, pushed forward in the boots by the height of the heels, burned as with fire from the pain of outraged flesh rubbing against stiff leather.

But it was not in him to quit. He set his teeth in his exhaustion and ploughed on up the trail. At last he saw the far, faint lights of Tascosa. The last mile or two were interminable, but he walked into the Bird Cage just as the clock on the wall was striking three.

The music had started for a dance. A girl in a spangled dress ran up to him.

"Come on. Let's dance," she cried; then stopped and looked at him in surprise: "What's the matter with you?"

The Ranger climbed up on the bar and beat upon it with the heel of his boot. The dancers stopped in their tracks as the music died.

"The Kiowas are on the warpath. They've got two white men trapped on the big island below the bend. Gather all the horses, guns, and men you can. We start in twenty minutes."

Cowboys left their partners standing in the middle of the floor. The musicians dropped their bows and fiddles. Bar-tenders left unfilled the orders they had just taken. For Indians in their war-paint were a fact always very near to the frontiersman, and whatever faults the Southwest may have had in those days, its warm heart answered instantly the call for help.

The dancers scattered in all directions to get ready. A gong, beaten by the owner of the Bird Cage, rang out stridently into the quiet night to rally sleeping citizens. Children, wakened by the clamor, began to wail. Dogs barked. Excited men flung out questions and hurried away without waiting for answers.

But out of the confusion came swift action. Each man looked to his own ammunition, weapons, horse. Women hurriedly put up lunches and packed saddlebags with supplies. In an incredibly short time a company of fifty riders had gathered in front of the Bird Cage.

With the Ranger at their head, they went out of town at a fast trot. If there had been anybody there to notice it, he would have seen that the clock on the wall at the Bird Cage registered the time as twenty-seven minutes past three.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TEST

WHEN Ridley heard the faint *plop* of the Ranger's body as it dropped into the water, his heart died under the fifth rib. He was alone — alone with a wounded man in his care, and five hundred fiends ravenous for his blood. For a moment the temptation was strong in him to follow Roberts into the water. Why should he stay to let these devils torture him? Dinsmore had betrayed him, to the ruination of his life. He owed the fellow nothing but ill-will. And the man was a triple-notch murderer. It would be a good riddance to the country if he should be killed.

But the arguments of the young fellow did not convince him. He had showed the white feather once on impulse, without a chance to reason out the thing. But if he deserted this wounded man now he would be a yellow coyote — and he knew it. There was something in him stronger than fear that took him back to the helpless outlaw babbling disjointed ravings.

He bathed the man's fevered body with cold water from the river and changed the bandages on the wound. He listened, in an agony of apprehension, for the sound of a shot. None came, but this did not bring certainty that the Ranger had

escaped. He had left behind all his arms, and it was quite possible that they had captured him without first wounding him.

Arthur reasoned with himself about his terror. Of what use was it? Why fear, since he had to face the danger anyhow? But when he thought of the morning and what it would bring forth he was sick with the dread he could not crush.

The hours lagged endlessly. He had his watch out a thousand times trying to read its face. Occasionally he crept around the island to make sure the Kiowas were not trying to surprise him. Hope began to grow in him as the night grew old, and this alternated with terror; for he knew that with the coming of dawn, the redskins would begin an attack.

His mind followed the Ranger on his journey. By this time he must surely be halfway to Tascosa if he had escaped the Kiowas. . . . Now he might have reached the cottonwood clump beyond Big Ford. . . . Perhaps he might jump up a camp outfit with horses. If so, that would cut down the time needed to reach town.

Five o'clock by Ridley's watch! He made another circuit of his little island, and at the head of it stopped to peer into the lessening darkness. A log, traveling down the river from some point near its headwaters in New Mexico, was drifting toward the island. His attention was arrested by the way it traveled. A log in a stream follows the

line of least resistance. It floats in such a way as to offer the smallest surface to the force of the current. But this log was going down at a right angle to the bank instead of parallel to it. Was it being propelled by the current alone, or by some living power behind it?

Ridley posted himself behind a cottonwood, his repeater ready for action. In another moment he would know, because if the log was adrift in the river, it would miss the point of the island and keep on its way.

Straight to the point of land the log came. There it stuck against the nose of the island. A head followed by a naked body drew itself from behind the log and climbed across it to the bank above. A second head and body appeared, a third and a fourth.

Ridley's fear was gone. He had a job to do, and he went at it in a workmanlike manner. His first shot dropped the brave on the bank. His second missed, his third went hissing up the river. But the fourth caught full in the throat one of the Kiowas on the log. The painted warrior shot headfirst into the water and dropped as though he had been a stone. Before Arthur could fire again, the passengers astride the dead tree dived into the stream. Slowly the log swung around and was sucked into the current. Here and there a feathered head bobbed up. The boy fired at them from a sense of duty, but he did not flatter himself that he had scored another hit.

But the immediate danger of being rushed was past. Ridley circled the island again to make sure that the attack at the head had not been a feint to cover one in the rear.

During the night Arthur had not been idle. Behind a large rock he had scooped out a small cave in which he and the wounded man might lie protected. Now the Indians, in the full light of day, were spraying the spot with bullets. Fortunately they were notoriously poor shots, and their guns were the worst ever made. For hours the fusillade continued. Occasionally the defender answered with a shot or two to discourage any further attempt at storming his position.

The most welcome sound in Ridley's life was a scattering volley of shots that came from back of the Kiowa camp. There was a sudden rush for horses by the braves and the scurry of pounding hoofs as they fled across the prairie. A moment later came the whoop of the cowboys in the rescue party.

Arthur, in an ecstasy of relief, ran to the edge of the water and waved his hat. Across the river came in answer the "Yip-yip, yippy-yip-yip" of the line-riders in the company. Several of them plunged into the stream and swam their horses across to the island. Among these were Jumbo Wilkins and Tex Roberts.

"I see you done held the fort, son," said the fat man. "Fine and dandy! How 's Dinsmore?"

"Quieter. He slept a good deal in the night. How are we going to get him across the river?"

The Ranger joined them. He nodded a friendly greeting at Ridley.

"Our luck held up all right. I see you been doin' some fancy shootin'."

Arthur looked at him. The eyes of the Easterner were full of timid doubt. What did this game Texan think of him who had proposed to leave a wounded man to his fate? The Ranger beamed a kindly comradeship, but the other young fellow wondered what was passing in the back of his mind.

They held a committee on ways and means about Dinsmore.

"We can't stay here — got to get him to town where he can be fixed up," Jumbo said.

"We'll take him over to the other bank and send for a buckboard," decided Jack.

The wounded man was carried to the head of the island, and strapped to the back of a horse. Jumbo, Roberts, and Ridley guided the horse into the current and helped it fight through to the shallow water beyond.

Twenty-four hours later Dinsmore was in bed in Tascosa. Dr. Bridgman said, with the usual qualification about complications, that the man probably would get well. The bullet had not punctured his lungs.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SHY YOUNG MAN DINES

RAMONA met Arthur Ridley face to face just outside of the post-office.

"You dandy boy!" she cried, and held out both hands to him. Her eyes were shining. The gifts of friendship and admiration were in them.

He could not find a word to say. A lump rose in his throat and choked him.

"It was just fine of you — fine!" she told him. "I was so glad to hear that a friend of mine did it. You *are* still my friend, are n't you?"

"If you 'll let me be," he said humbly. "But — I have n't done anything to deserve it."

"Everybody 's praising you because you stayed with that Dinsmore man and saved his life at the risk of your own — after he had treated you so mean too. I'm so proud of you."

"You need n't be," he answered bluntly. "I wanted to slip away and leave him. I — I proposed it to Jack Roberts. But he would n't have it. He laid the law down. One of us had to go, one stay. I had n't the nerve to go, so I stayed."

"I don't believe it — not for a minute," came her quick, indignant response. "And if you did — what of it? It is n't what we want to do that counts. It 's what we really do!"

He shook his head wistfully. He would have liked to believe her, but he felt there was no credit due him.

"I fought because I had to if I was going to save my own skin. I have n't told any one else this, but I can't have you thinking me game when I know I 'm not."

"Was it to save yourself you flung yourself down in front of father and let that awful man Dinsmore shoot at you?" she demanded, eyes flashing.

"A fellow can't stand by and see some one murdered without lifting a hand. I did n't have time to get frightened that time."

"Well, all I've got to say is that you're the biggest goose I ever saw, Art Ridley. Here you've done two fine things and you go around trying to show what a big coward you are."

He smiled gravely. "I'm not advertising it. I told you because —"

" — Because you're afraid I'll think too well of you."

"Because I want you to know me as I am."

"Then if I'm to know you as you are I'll have to get a chance to see what you really are. Dad and Auntie and I will expect you to supper tomorrow night."

"Thank you. I'll be there."

Casually she enlarged her invitation. "I don't suppose you'll see that very shy young man, Mr. Roberts."

"I might."

"Then, will you ask him to come too? I'm going to find out whether you acted as scared as you say you did."

"Jack knows how scared I was, but he won't tell. Sure I'll get word to him."

He did. At precisely six o'clock the two young men appeared at the home of Clint Wadley's sister. The Ranger was a very self-conscious guest. It was the first time he had dined with ladies at their home since he had lost his own mother ten years earlier. He did not know what to do with his hands and feet. The same would have been true of his hat if Ramona had not solved that problem by taking it from him. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He felt a good deal warmer than the actual temperature of the room demanded.

But Ramona noticed from the background that as soon as she and her aunt retired from the scene his embarrassment vanished. This slim, brown young man was quite at his ease with Clint Wadley, much more so than young Ridley. He was essentially a man's man, and his young hostess liked him none the less for that.

She made a chance to talk with him alone after supper. They were standing in the parlor near the window. Ramona pressed the end of her little finger against a hole in the pane.

"I wonder if you'd like me to sing 'Swanee River' for you, Mr. Roberts?" she asked.

He did not mind being teased. By this time he had regained his confidence. He had discovered that she would not bite even though she might laugh at him in a friendly way.

"You sing it fine," he said.

"I was n't singing it for you the other time, but for Mr. — what 's-his-name, Gurley?"

"I could n't very well have you keep shoutin' out, 'I 'm a girl,' so I figured — "

"I know what you figured, sir. You wanted to take all the chances that were taken. Father says it was the quickest-witted thing he ever knew." She shot another dart at him, to his confusion. "Do you like my voice?"

"Well, ma'am, I —"

"You don't have to tell any stories. I see you don't."

Jack took heart. "If you're fishin' for a compliment —"

"What a tactful thing to tell a girl," she said, smiling.

"— I'll tell you that I never heard you sing better."

"Or worse, for that matter," she added; and with one of her swift changes of mood switched the topic of conversation. "How do you like Art Ridley?"

"He'll do to take along."

"That 's not the way he talks. He says he — he wanted to run away from the island and leave that man Dinsmore, but you would n't let him." Her eyes met his very directly.

"He 's a great lad for imaginin' things. I never want to see any one hold up his end better."

"You mean that he *did n't* say he wanted to leave Dinsmore?"

With her gaze searching him so steadily, it had to be an out-and-out lie to serve. Jack lied competently. "Not a word."

Her little finger tapped the hole in the pane gently while she reflected. "He told me —"

"That boy 's still worryin' about losin' that money for Mr. Wadley, don't you reckon? He 's got it tucked in his mind that a game man never would have been robbed. So he 's decided he must be yellow. Nothin' to it a-tall. No quitter ever would have stood off those Kiowas like he did."

"That 's what I think." She turned to the Ranger again, nodding agreement. "You 've relieved my mind. I should n't like to think that —"

She let her sentence trail out to nothing. Jack Roberts guessed its conclusion. She would n't like to think that the man she loved was not game.

CHAPTER XXIV

TEX BORROWS A BLACKSNAKE

DINSMORE recovered from his wound and was held prisoner by Captain Ellison for a month after he was well. Then the ranger captain dismissed the man with a warning.

"Skedaddle, you damn jayhawker," was his cavalier farewell. "But listen. If ever I get the deadwood on you an' yore outfit, I'll sure put you through. You know me, Dinsmore. I went through the war. For two years I took the hides off'n 'em.[1] I'm one of the lads that knocked the bark off this country. An' I've got the best bunch of man-hunters you ever did see. I'm not braggin'. I'm tellin' you that my boys will make you look like a plugged nickel if you don't get shet of yore meanness. They're a hell-poppin' bunch of jim-dandies, an' don't you ever forget it."

Homer Dinsmore spat tobacco-juice on the floor by way of expressing his contempt. "Hell!" he sneered. "We were doin' business in this neck of the woods before ever you come, an' we'll be here after you've gone."

The Ranger Captain gave a little shrug to his shoulders. "Some folks ain't got any more sense

[1] To "take the hides off'n 'em" was the expressive phraseology in which the buffalo-hunter described his business.

than that hog rootin' under the pecan tree, Dinsmore. I've seen this country when you could swap a buffalo-bull hide for a box of cartridges or a plug o' tobacco. You cayn't do it now, can you? I had thirty wagons full of bales of hides at old Fort Griffin two years ago. Now I could n't fill one with the best of luck. In five years the buffaloes will be gone absolutely — mebbe in less time. The Indians are goin' with the buffaloes — an' the bad-men are a-goin' to travel the same trail. Inside of three years they 'll sure be hard to find outside of jails. But you got to go yore own way. You're hard to curry, an' you wear 'em low. Suits me if it does you. We'll plant you with yore boots on, one of these days."

Dinsmore swaggered from the jail and presently rode out of town to join his companions. Three days later an acquaintance stopped Jack Roberts on the street.

"Seen Cap Ellison this mo'nin'? He was down at the shippin'-pen an' wanted to see you. The old man's hot as a ginger-mill about somethin'."

The Ranger strolled down toward the cattle-yards. On the way he met Arthur Ridley. They had come to be pretty good friends in the past month. The standards of the Texan were undergoing revision. He had been brought up in an outdoor school which taught that the rock-bottom factor of a man's character is gameness.

Without it nothing else counted. This was as vital for a man as virtue for a woman. But it had begun to reach him that pluck is largely a matter of training. Arthur had lived soft, and his nerve, like his muscles, needed toughening. Were his gayety, his loyalty, his fundamental decency, the affectionate sweetness of his disposition, to count for nothing? He had a dozen advantages that Jack had not, and the cowboy admired him even though he was not hard as a rock.

"Have you spoken to Captain Ellison yet?" asked Ridley eagerly.

"Says he 's thinkin' about it, Art. There 's goin' to be a vacancy on the force soon. My notion is that you 'll get the appointment."

It was a part of Ridley's charm for the Texan that he would not give up to his timidity. The young fellow meant to fight it out to a finish. That was one of the reasons why he wanted to join the Rangers, to be put in places that would force him to go through to a fighting finish. He had one other reason. Arthur wanted to settle a score with the Dinsmores.

Captain Ellison was listening to the complaint of a drover.

"I aim to drive a clean herd, Cap, but you know how it is yore own self. I start to drive in the spring when the hair 's long an' the brand 's hard to read. By the time I get here, the old hair is fallin' out an' the brand is plain. But what 's a

fellow to do? I cayn't drop those off-brands by the way, can I? The inspector —"

"That 's all right, Steel. The inspector knows you're on the level. Hello, Jack! I been lookin' for you."

The Captain drew his man to one side. "Steve Gurley 's in town. He came as a spokesman for the Dinsmores an' went to see Clint Wadley. The damn scoundrel served notice on Clint that the gang had written evidence which tied Ford up with their deviltry. He said if Clint did n't call me off so 's I 'd let 'em alone, they would disgrace his son's memory. Of course Wadley is all broke up about it. But he 's no quitter. He knows I'm goin' through, an' he would n't expect me not to do the work I'm paid for."

"Do you want me to arrest Gurley?"

"Would n't do any good. No; just keep tabs on the coyote till he leaves town. He ought to be black-snaked, but that 's not our business, I reckon."

Ridley walked back with the Ranger toward the main street of the town. From round a corner there came to them a strident voice.

"You stay right here, missy, till I'm through. I'm tellin' you about yore high-heeled brother. See? He was a rustler. That 's what he was — a low-down thief and brand-blotter."

"Let me pass. I won't listen to you." The clear young voice was expressive of both indignation and fear.

"Not a step till I'm through tellin' you. Me, I'm Steve Gurley, the curly-haired terror of the Panhandle. When I talk, you listen. Un'erstand?"

The speech of the man was thick with drink. He had spent the night at the Bird Cage and was now on his way to the corral for his horse.

"You take Miss Ramona home. I'll tend to Gurley," said Roberts curtly to his friend. Into his eyes had come a cold rage Arthur had never before seen there.

At sight of them the bully's brutal insolence vanished. He tried to pass on his way, but the Ranger stopped him.

"Just a moment, Gurley. You're goin' with me," said Jack, ominously quiet.

White and shaken, 'Mona bit her lip to keep from weeping. She flashed one look of gratitude at her father's former line-rider, and with a little sob of relief took Ridley's offered arm.

"You got a warrant for me?" bluffed the outlaw.

At short range there is no weapon more deadly than the human eye. Jack Roberts looked at the bully and said: "Give me yore gun."

Steve Gurley shot his slant look at the Ranger, considered possibilities — and did as he was told.

"Now right about face and back-track uptown," ordered the officer.

At McGuffey's store Jack stopped his prisoner. A dozen punchers and cattlemen were hanging

about. Among them was Jumbo Wilkins. He had a blacksnake whip in his hand and was teasing a pup with it. The Ranger handed over to Jumbo his guns and borrowed the whip.

Gurley backed off in a sudden alarm. "Don't you touch me! Don't you dass touch me! I'll cut yore heart out if you do."

The lash whistled through the air and wound itself cruelly round the legs of the bully. The man gave a yell of rage and pain. He lunged forward to close with Roberts, and met a driving left that caught him between the eyes and flung him back. Before he could recover the Ranger had him by the collar at arm's length and the torture of the whip was maddening him. He cursed, struggled, raved, threatened, begged for mercy. He tried to fling himself to the ground. He wept tears of agony. But there was no escape from the deadly blacksnake that was cutting his flesh to ribbons.

Roberts, sick at the thing he had been doing, flung the shrieking man aside and leaned up against the wall of the store.

Jumbo came across to him and offered his friend a drink.

"You'll feel better if you take a swallow of old forty-rod," he promised.

The younger man shook his head. "Much obliged, old-timer. I'm all right now. It was a kind of sickenin' job, but I had to do it or kill him."

"What was it all about?" asked Jumbo eagerly. The fat line-rider was a good deal of a gossip and loved to know the inside of every story.

Jack cast about for a reason. "He — he said I had red hair."

"Well, you old son of a mule-skinner, what 's the matter with that? You have, ain't you?" demanded the amazed Wilkins.

"Mebbe I have, but he can't tell me so."

That was all the satisfaction the public ever got. It did a good deal of guessing, however, and none of it came near the truth.

CHAPTER XXV

"THEY'RE RUNNIN' ME OUTA TOWN"

JUMBO WILKINS came wheezing into the Sunset Trail corral, where Jack Roberts was mending a broken bridle. " 'Lo, Tex. Looks like you're gittin' popular, son. Folks a-comin' in fifty miles for to have a little talk with you."

The eyes of the Ranger grew intelligent. He knew Jumbo's habit of mind. The big line-rider always made the most of any news he might have.

"Friends of mine?" asked Jack casually.

"Well, mebbe friends ain't just the word. Say acquaintances. You know 'em well enough to shoot at and to blacksnake 'em, but not well enough to drink with."

"Did they *say* they wanted to see me?"

"A nod is as good as a wink to a blind bronc. They said they'd come to make you hard to find."

The Ranger hammered down a rivet carefully. "Many of 'em?"

"Two this trip. One of 'em used to think yore topknot was red. I dunno what he thinks now."

"And the other?"

"Carries the brand of Overstreet."

"Where are these anxious citizens, Jumbo?"

"Last I saw of 'em they were at the Bird Cage

lappin' up another of the same. They've got business with Clint Wadley, too, they said."

Jack guessed that business was blackmail. It occurred to him that since these visitors had come to town to see him, he had better gratify their desire promptly. Perhaps after they had talked with him they might not have time to do their business with Wadley.

As Jumbo waddled uptown beside him, Roberts arranged the details of his little plan. They separated at the corner of the street a block from the Bird Cage. Wilkins had offered to lend a hand, but his friend defined the limit of the help he might give.

"You come in, shake hands with me, an' ask that question. Then you're through. Understand, Jumbo?"

"Sure. But I want to tell you again Overstreet is no false-alarm bad-man. He'll fight at the drop of the hat. That's his reputation, anyhow — wears 'em low an' comes a-shootin'."

"I'll watch out for him. An' I'll look for you in about three minutes."

"Me, I'll be there, son, and I wish you the best of luck."

Gurley was at the bar facing the door when the Ranger walked into the Bird Cage. He had been just ready to gulp down another drink, but as his eyes fell on this youth who came forward with an elastic step the heart died within him. It

had been easy while the liquor was in his brain to brag of what he meant to do. It was quite another thing to face in battle this brown, competent youth who could hit silver dollars in the air with a revolver.

His companion read in Gurley's sallow face the dismay that had attacked him. Overstreet turned and faced the newcomer. The outlaw was a short, heavy-set man with remarkably long arms. He had come from Trinidad, Colorado, and brought with him the reputation of a killer. His eyes looked hard at the red-haired youngster, but he made no comment.

Jack spoke to the bartender. He looked at neither of the bad-men, but he was very coolly and alertly on guard.

"Joe, I left my blacksnake at home," he said. "Have you got one handy?"

"Some guys are lucky, Steve," jeered Overstreet, taking his cue from the Ranger. "Because you fell over a box and this fellow beat you up while you was down, he thinks he 's a regular go-getter. He looks to me like a counterfeit four-bit piece, if anybody asks you."

Jumbo Wilkins puffed into the place and accepted the Ranger's invitation to take a drink.

"What makes you so gaunted, Jack? You look right peaked," he commented as they waited for their drinks.

"Scared stiff, Jumbo. I hear two wild an'

woolly bad-men are after me. One is a tall, lop-sided, cock-eyed rooster, an' the other is a hammered-down sawed-off runt. They sure have got me good an' scared. I've been runnin' ever since I heard they were in town."

Gurley gulped down his drink and turned toward the door hastily. "Come, let's go, Overstreet. I got to see a man."

The Texan and the Coloradoan looked at each other with steel-cold eyes. They measured each other in deadly silence, and while one might have counted twenty the shadow of death hovered over the room. Then Overstreet made his choice. The bragging had all been done by Gurley. He could save his face without putting up a fight.

"Funny how some folks are all blown up by a little luck," he sneered, and he followed his friend to the street.

"You got 'em buffaloed sure, Jack. Tell me how you do it," demanded Jumbo with a fat grin.

"I'm the law, Jumbo."

"Go tell that to the Mexicans, son. What do you reckon a killer like Overstreet cares for the law? He figured you might down him before he could gun you — did n't want to risk an even break with you."

The Ranger poured his untasted liquor into the spittoon and settled the bill. "Think I'll drop around to the Silver Dollar an' see if my birds have lit again."

At the Silver Dollar Jack found his friend the ex-Confederate doing business with another cattleman.

"I'd call that a sorry-lookin' lot, Winters," he was saying. "I know a jack-pot bunch of cows when I see 'em. They look to me like they been fed on short grass an' shin-oak." His face lighted at sight of the Ranger. "Hello, brindle-haid! Did n't know you was in town."

The quick eye of the officer had swept over the place and found the two men he wanted sitting inconspicuously at a small table.

"I'm not here for long, Sam. Two genuwine blown-in-the-bottle bad-men are after my scalp. They're runnin' me outa town. Seen anything of 'em? They belong to the Dinsmore outfit."

The old soldier looked at him with a sudden startled expression. He knew well what men were sitting against the wall a few steps from him. This was talk that might have to be backed by a six-shooter. Bullets were likely to be flying soon.

"You don't look to me like you're hittin' yore heels very fast to make a get-away, Jack," he said dryly.

"I'm sure on the jump. They're no bully-puss kind of men, but sure enough terrors from the chaparral. If I never get out o' town, ship my saddle in a gunny-sack to my brother at Dallas."

"Makin' yore will, are you?" inquired Joe Johnston's former trooper.

The red-haired man grinned. "I got to make arrangements. They came here to get me. Two of 'em — bad-men with blood in their eyes." He hummed, with jaunty insolence:

"He's a killer and a hater!
He's the great annihilator!
He's a terror of the boundless prai-ree.

"That goes double. I'm certainly one anxious citizen. Don't you let 'em hurt me, Sam."

There was a movement at the table where the two men were sitting. One of them had slid from his chair and was moving toward the back door.

The Ranger pretended to catch sight of him for the first time. "Hello, Gurley! What's yore hurry? Got to see another man, have you?"

The rustler did not wait to answer. He vanished through the door and fled down the alley in the direction of the corral. Overstreet could do as he pleased, but he intended to slap a saddle on his horse and make tracks for the cap-rock country.

Overstreet himself was not precisely comfortable in his mind, but he did not intend to let a smooth-faced boy run him out of the gambling-house before a dozen witnesses. If he had to fight, he would fight. But in his heart he cursed Gurley for a yellow-backed braggart. The fellow had got him into this and then turned tail. The man from Colorado wished devoutly that Pete Dinsmore were beside him.

"You're talkin' at me, young fellow. Listen: I ain't lookin' for any trouble with you — none a-tall. But I'm not Steve Gurley. Where I come from, folks grow man-size. Don't lean on me too hard. I'm liable to decrease the census of red-haired guys."

Overstreet rose and glared at him, but at the same time one hand was reaching for his hat.

"You leavin' town too, Mr. Overstreet?" inquired the Ranger.

"What 's it to you? I'll go when I 'm ready."

"'We shall meet, but we shall miss you — there will be one vacant chair,'" murmured the young officer, misquoting a song of the day. "Seems like there's nothin' to this life but meetin' an' partin'. Here you are one minute, an' in a quarter of an hour you're hittin' the high spots tryin' to catch up with friend Steve."

"Who said so? I'll go when I'm good an' ready," reiterated the bad-man.

"Well, yore bronc needs a gallop to take the kinks out of his legs. Give my regards to the Dinsmores an' tell 'em that Tascosa is no sort of place for shorthorns or tinhorns."

"Better come an' give them regards yore own self."

"Mebbe I will, one of these glad mo'nin's. So long, Mr. Overstreet. Much obliged to you an' Steve for not massacreein' me."

The ironic thanks of the Ranger were lost, for

the killer from Colorado was already swaggering out of the front door.

The old Confederate gave a whoop of delight. "I never did see yore match, you doggoned old scalawag. You'd better go up into Mexico and make Billy the Kid [1] eat out of yore hand. This tame country is no place for you, Jack."

Roberts made his usual patient explanation. "It's the law. They can't buck the whole Lone Star State. If he shot me, a whole passel of Rangers would be on his back pretty soon. So he hits the trail instead." He turned to Ridley, who had just come into the Silver Dollar. "Art, will you keep cases on Overstreet an' see whether he leaves town right away?"

A quarter of an hour later Ridley was back with information.

"Overstreet's left town — lit out after Gurley."

The old Rebel grinned. "He won't catch him this side of the cap-rock."

[1] Billy The Kid was the most notorious outlaw of the day. He is said to have killed twenty-one men before Sheriff Pat Garrett killed him at the age of twenty-one years.

CHAPTER XXVI

FOR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Mr. Peter Dinsmore was of both an impulsive and obstinate disposition. He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. Somewhere he had heard that if a man desired his business well done, he must do it himself. Gurley had proved a poor messenger. Peter would call upon Clint Wadley in person and arrange an armistice.

He had another and a more urgent reason for getting to town promptly. A jumping toothache had kept him awake all night. After he reached Tascosa, Dinsmore was annoyed to find that Dr. Bridgman had ridden down the river to look after the fractured leg of a mule-skinner.

"Is n't there any one else in this condemned burg can pull teeth?" he demanded irritably of the bartender at the Bird Cage.

"There certainly is. Buttermilk Brown is a sure-enough dentist. He had to take to bull-whackin' for to make a livin', but I reckon he 's not forgot how. You 'll probably find him sleepin' off a hang-over at the Four-Bit Corral."

This prophecy proved true, but Dinsmore was not one to let trifles turn him aside. He led the reluctant ex-dentist to a water-trough and soused his head under the pump.

"Is that a-plenty?" he asked presently, desisting from his exercise with the pump-handle.

Buttermilk sputtered a half-drowned assent. His nerves were still jumpy, and his head was not clear, but he had had enough cold water. Heroic treatment of this sort was not necessary to fit him for pulling a tooth.

They adjourned to the room where Buttermilk had stored his professional tools. Dinsmore indicated the back tooth that had to come out. The dentist peered at it, inserted his forceps and set to work. The tooth came out hard, but at last he exhibited its long prongs to the tortured victim.

"We get results," said Buttermilk proudly.

"How much?" asked Pete.

It happened that the dentist did not know his patient. He put a price of five dollars on the job. Dinsmore paid it and walked with Buttermilk to the nearest saloon for a drink.

Pete needed a little bracer. The jumping pain still pounded like a piledriver at his jaw. While the bartender was handing him a glass and a bottle, Dinsmore caressed tenderly the aching emptiness and made a horrible discovery. Buttermilk Brown had pulled the wrong tooth.

Considering his temperament, Pete showed remarkable self-restraint. He did not slay Buttermilk violently and instantly. Instead he led him back to the room of torture.

"You pulled the wrong tooth, you drunken wreck," he said in effect, but in much more emphatic words. "Now yank out the right one, and if you make another mistake —"

He did not finish the threat, but it is possible that Buttermilk understood. The dentist removed with difficulty the diseased molar.

"Well, we're through now," he said cheerfully. "I don't know as I ought to charge you for that last one. I'll leave that to you to say."

"We're not quite through," corrected the patient. "I'm goin' to teach you to play monkey-shines with Pete Dinsmore's teeth." He laid a large revolver on the table and picked up the forceps. "Take that chair, you bowlegged, knock-kneed, run-down runt."

Buttermilk protested in vain. He begged the bad-man for mercy with tears in his eyes.

"I'm goin' to do Scripture to you, and then some," explained Dinsmore. "It says in the Bible a tooth for a tooth, but I aim to pay good measure."

The amateur dentist pulled four teeth and played no favorites. A molar, a bicuspid, a canine, and an incisor were laid in succession on the table.

Buttermilk Brown wept with rage and pain.

"Four times five is twenty. Dig up twenty dollars for professional services," said Pete.

His tearful patient paid the fee. This was the

most painful, violent, and high-handed episode of Buttermilk's young life. Never in Shelbyville, Indiana, from which town he had migrated hopefully westward with his diploma, had such outrages been heard of.

The instruments of Providence are sometimes strange ones. Nobody would have picked Pete Dinsmore for a reformer, but he changed the course of one young dentist's life. Buttermilk fled from the Southwest in horror, took the pledge eagerly, returned to Shelbyville and married the belle of the town. He became a specialist in bridge-work, of which he carried a golden example in his own mouth. His wife has always understood that Dr. Brown — nobody ever called him Buttermilk in his portly, prosperous Indiana days — lost his teeth trying to save a child from a runaway. Be that as it may, there is no record that he ever again pulled the wrong tooth for a patient.

Having completed his deed of justice, Dinsmore in high good humor with himself set out to call on Clint Wadley. He had made an inoffensive human being suffer, and that is always something to a man's credit. If he could not do any better, Pete would bully a horse, but he naturally preferred humans. They were more sensitive to pain.

CHAPTER XXVII

CLINT FREES HIS MIND

WADLEY was sitting on the porch with Ramona. He was still a semi-invalid, and when he exercised too much his daughter scolded him like the little mother she was.

"Keep me here much longer, an' I'll turn into a regular old gossip in breeches," he complained. "I'll be Jumbo Wilkins Number Two, like as not."

"Is Jumbo a specialist in gossip?" asked Ramona. She liked to get her father at reminiscences. It helped to pass time that hung heavy on his hands.

"Is he? Girl, he could talk a hind leg off'n a buckskin mule, Jumbo could." He stopped to chuckle. "Oncet, when we were drivin' a bunch of yearlin's on the Brazos, one of the boys picked up an old skull. Prob'ly some poor fellow killed by the Indians. Anyhow, that night when Jumbo was wound up good, one of the lads pretended to discover that skull an' brought it into the camp-fire light. Some one had wrote on it: 'Talked to death by Jumbo Wilkins.'"

'Mona rather missed the point. She was watching a man slouching down the road toward them. He was heavy-set and unwieldy, and he wore a wrinkled suit of butternut jeans.

The eyes of the cattleman chilled. "You go into the house, 'Mona. That fellow's Pete Dinsmore. I don't want you to meet him."

"Don't you, Dad?" The heart of the girl fluttered at sight of this man who had nearly killed her father, but it was not fear but anger that burned in her eyes. "I'm going to sit right here. What does he want? He's not coming — to make trouble, is he?"

"No. We've got business to settle. You run along in."

"I know what your business is. It's — about Ford."

He looked at her in surprised dismay. "Who told you that, honey?"

"I'll tell you about that after he's gone. I want to stay, Dad, to show him that I know all about it, and that we're not going to let him carry out any blackmailing scheme against us."

Dinsmore nodded grouchily as he came up the walk to the house. Wadley did not ask him to sit down, and since there were no unoccupied chairs the rustler remained standing.

"I got to have a talk with you, Clint," the outlaw said. "Send yore girl into the house."

"She'll listen to anything you have to say, Dinsmore. Get through with it soon as you can, an' hit the trail," said the cattleman curtly.

The other man flushed darkly. "You talk

mighty biggity these days. I remember when you was n't nothin' but a busted line-rider."

"Mebbeso. And before that I was a soldier in the army while you was doin' guerrilla jayhawkin'."

"Go ahead. Say anything you've a mind to, Clint. I'll make you pay before I'm through with you," answered the bad-man venomously.

"You will if you can; I know that. You're a bad lot, Dinsmore, you an' yore whole outfit. I'm glad Ellison an' his Rangers are goin' to clear you out of the country. A sure-enough good riddance, if any one asks me."

The cattleman looked hard at him. He too had been a fighting man, but it was not his reputation for gameness that restrained the ruffian. Wadley was a notch too high for him. He could kill another bad-man or some drunken loafer and get away with it. But he had seen the sentiment of the country when his brother had wounded the cattleman. It would not do to go too far. Times were changing in the Panhandle. Henceforth lawlessness would have to travel by night and work under cover. With the coming of the Rangers, men who favored law were more outspoken. Dinsmore noticed that they deferred less to him, partly, no doubt, because of what that fool boy Roberts had done without having yet had to pay for it.

"That 's what I've come to see you about,

Wadley. I'm not lookin' for trouble, but I never ran away from it in my life. No livin' man can lay on me without hell poppin'. You know it."

"Is that what you came to tell me, Dinsmore?" asked the owner of the A T O, his mouth set grim and hard.

There was an ugly look on the face of the outlaw, a cold glitter of anger in his deep-set eyes. "I hear you set the world an' all by that girl of yours there. Better send her in, Wadley. I'm loaded with straight talk."

The girl leaned forward in the chair. She looked at him with a flash of disdainful eyes in which was a touch of feminine ferocity. But she let her father answer the man.

"Go on," said the old Texan. "Onload what you've got to say, an' then pull yore freight."

"Suits me, Clint. I'm here to make a bargain with you. Call Ellison off. Make him let me an' my friends alone. If you don't, we're goin' to talk — about yore boy Ford." The man's upper lip lifted in a grin. He looked first at the father, then at the daughter.

There was a tightening of the soft, round throat, but she met his look without wincing. The pallor of her face lent accent to the contemptuous loathing of the slender girl.

"What are you goin' to say — that you murdered him, shot him down from behind?" demanded Wadley.

"That's a lie, Clint. You know who killed him — an' why he did it. Ford could n't let the girls alone. I warned him as a friend, but he was hell-bent on havin' his own way."

The voice of the cattleman trembled. "Some day — I'm goin' to hunt you down like a wolf for what you did to my boy."

A lump jumped to Ramona's throat. She slipped her little hand into the big one of her father, and with it went all her sympathy and all her love.

"You're 'way off, Wadley. The boy was our friend. Why should we shoot him?" asked the man from the chaparral.

"Because he interfered with you when you robbed my messenger."

The startled eyes of the outlaw jumped to meet those of the cattleman. For a fraction of a second he was caught off his guard. Then the film of wary craftiness covered them again.

"That's plumb foolishness, Clint. The Mexican — what's his name? — killed Ford because he was jealous, an' if it had n't been for you, he'd 'a' paid for it long ago. But that ain't what I came to talk about. I'm here to tell you that I've got evidence to prove that Ford was a rustler an' a hold-up. If it comes to a show-down, we're goin' to tell what we know. Mebbe you want folks to know what kind of a brother yore girl had. That's up to you."

Wadley exploded in a sudden fury of passion. "I'll make no bargain with the murderer of my boy. Get out of here, you damned yellow wolf. I don't want any truck with you at all till I get a chance to stomp you down like I would a rattler."

The bad-man bared his fangs. For one moment of horror Ramona thought he was going to strike like the reptile to which her father had compared him. He glared at the cattleman, the impulse strong in him to kill and be done with it. But the other side of him — the caution that had made it possible for him to survive so long in a world of violent men — held his hand until the blood-lust passed from his brain.

"You've said a-plenty," he snarled thickly. "Me, I've made my last offer to you. It's war between me 'n' you from now on."

He turned away and went slouching down the path to the road.

The two on the porch watched him out of sight. The girl had slipped inside her father's arm and was sobbing softly on his shoulder.

"There, honeybug, now don't you — don't you," Clint comforted. "He cayn't do us any harm. Ellison's hot on his trail. I'll give him six months, an' then he's through. Don't you fret, sweetheart. Daddy will look out for you all right."

"I — I was n't thinking about me," she whispered.

Both of them were thinking of the dead boy

and the threat to blacken his memory, but neither of them confessed it to the other. Wadley cast about for something to divert her mind and found it in an unanswered question of his own.

"You was goin' to tell me how come you to know what he wanted to talk with me about," the father reminded her.

"You remember that day when Arthur Ridley brought me home?"

He nodded assent.

"One of the Dinsmore gang — the one they call Steve Gurley — met me on the street. He was drunk, an' he stopped me to tell me about — Ford. I tried to pass, an' he would n't let me. He frightened me. Then Arthur an' Mr. Roberts came round the corner. Arthur came home with me, an' — you know what happened in front of McGuffey's store."

The face of the girl had flushed a sudden scarlet. Her father stared at her in an amazement that gave way to understanding. Through his veins there crashed a wave of emotion. If he had held any secret grudge against Tex Roberts, it vanished forever that moment. This was the kind of son he would have liked to have himself.

"By ginger, that was what he beat Gurley up for! Nobody knows why, an' Roberts kept the real reason under his hat. He 's a prince, Jack Roberts is. I did that boy a wrong, 'Mona, an' guessed it all the time, just because he had a

mix-up with Ford. He was n't to blame for that, anyhow, I've been told."

Ramona felt herself unaccountably trembling. There was a queer little lump in her throat, but she knew it was born of gladness.

"He 's been good to me," she said, and told of the experience with the traveling salesman on the stage.

Clint Wadley laughed. "I never saw that boy's beat. He 's got everything a fellow needs to win. I can tell you one thing; he's goin' to get a chance to run the A T O for me before he 's forty-eight hours older. He'll be a good buy, no matter what salary he sticks me for."

'Mona became aware that she was going to break down — and "make a little fool of herself," as she would have put it.

"I forgot to water my canary," she announced abruptly.

The girl jumped up, ran into the house and to her room. But if the canary was suffering from thirst, it remained neglected. Ramona's telltale face was buried in a pillow. She was not quite ready yet to look into her own eyes and read the message they told.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON A COLD TRAIL

"Dog it, Jack, we got to go after the Dinsmores," said Ellison, pounding the table with his fist. "I've just had a letter from the old man wantin' to know why we don't get results. It 's not the Ranger policy to wait for outlaws to come to us. We go after 'em."

Tex smiled cheerfully. "Suits me fine. What are your instructions, Captain? Want me to arrest Homer Dinsmore again?"

"What would I do with him if you got him?" snapped the old-timer.

"You could turn him loose again," suggested Roberts, not entirely without sarcasm.

"If you boys were worth the powder to blow you-all up —!" exploded the veteran.

"Instead of bein' a jackpot bunch of triflin' no-account scalawags," murmured Jack.

"— You'd hustle out an' get evidence against 'em."

"Sounds reasonable." The Ranger lifted his heels to the seat of a second chair and rolled him a cigarette.

"You'd find out where they're hidin' the cattle they rustle."

"Are you givin' me an assignment, Captain?"

"You done said it, son. There 's a bunch of rustled stock up in the rocks somewheres. You know it. Question is, can you find the cache?"

"I can try."

"Was n't it you told me once about bumpin' into a rustler doin' business whilst you was ridin' the line?"

"At the mouth of Box Cañon — yes."

"Well, wha 's the matter with you scoutin' up Box Cañon an' seein' what you find?"

"They 're roostin' up there somewheres. I'll bet a hat on that."

"How many boys you want with you?"

Jack considered. "One. I'll take Ridley if you don't mind."

"He 's a tenderfoot," suggested Ellison doubtfully. "Won't be of any help to you a-tall in cutting sign. If you leave him he 's liable to get lost. Better take Moser, had n't you?"

"Rather have Ridley. He does n't claim to know it all. Besides, we've got to break him in sometime."

"Suits me if he does you. It 's yore party."

"We'll start in the mo'nin'."

"The sooner the quicker," agreed the Captain. "I want the old man to know we're not spendin' our time settin' around a office. He 's got no call to crawl my hump when you boys are doin' the best you can. Well, go to it, son. See if you-all can get evidence that will stand

up so 's we can collect that bunch of hawss-thieves."

Before daybreak the two Rangers were on their way. They drove a pack-horse, their supplies loaded on a sawbuck saddle with kyacks. Jack had been brought up in the Panhandle. He knew this country as a seventh-grade teacher does her geography. Therefore he cut across the desert to the cap-rock, thence to Dry Creek, and so by sunset to Box Cañon. At the mouth of the gulch they slept under the stars. As soon as they had cooked their coffee and bacon Roberts stamped out the fire.

"We don't want to advertise we're here. I'm some particular about my health. I'd hate to get dry-gulched [1] on this job," said Jack.

"Would the Dinsmores shoot us if they found us?" asked Ridley, searching with his head for the softest spot in his saddle for a pillow.

"Would a calf milk its mother? They're sore as a toad at me, an' I expect that goes for any other Ranger too. Homer might give us an even break because we stayed with him on the island, but I'd hate to bet my head on that."

"If we get any evidence against them they can't afford to let us go," agreed Arthur.

"An' if they jump us up, how're they goin' to

[1] A man is said to be "dry-gulched" when he mysteriously disappears, — killed by his enemies and buried under a pile of rocks.

know how much we've seen? There's one safe way, an' they would ce'tainly take it."

"Dead men tell no tales, it's said."

"Some of 'em do an' some don't. I never met up with a proverb yet that was n't 'way off about half the time. For instance, that one you quoted. Rutherford Wadley's body told me considerable. It said that he'd been killed on the bluff above an' flung down; that he'd been shot by a rifle in the hands of a man standin' about a hundred an' fifty yards away; that he'd been taken by surprise an' probably robbed."

"It would n't have told me all that."

"Not till you learn to read sign closer than you do. An outdoor education is like a schoolbook one. You can't learn it in a day or a week or a year."

"You're no Methuselah. There's still hope for me."

"Lots o' hope. It's mostly keepin' yore eyes open an' yore brain workin'. I'm still only in the A B C class, but a fellow learns somethin' every day if he's that kind."

"If it's a matter of brains, why do Indians make the best trailers? You would n't say their brains are as good as a white man's, would you?"

"No; an' I'd say there's nothin' on earth an Indian can do as well as a white man, given the same chance to learn it. Indians know the out-

doors because they have to know it to live. The desert 's no prodigal mother. Her sons have to rustle right smart to keep their tummies satisfied. If the 'Paches and the Kiowas did n't know how to cut sign an' read it, how to hunt an' fish an' follow a trail, they 'd all be in their happy huntin' grounds long ago. They 're what old Nature has made 'em. But I'll tell you this. When a white man gives his mind to it he understands the life of the plains better than any Indian does. His brains are better, an' he goes back an' looks for causes. The best trailers in the world are whites, not redskins."

"I did n't know that," Arthur said.

"Ask any old-timer if it ain't so."

They were eating breakfast when the light on the horizon announced a new day on the way. Already this light was saturating the atmosphere and dissolving shadows. The vegetation of the plains, the wave rolls of the land, the distant horizon line, became more distinct. By the time the sun pushed into sight the Rangers were in the saddle.

Roberts led through the polecat brush to the summit of a little mesa which overlooked the gulch. Along the edge of the ravine he rode, preferring the bluff to the sandy wash below because the ground was less likely to tell the Dinsmores a story of two travelers riding up Box Cañon. At the head of the gorge a faint trail

dipped to the left. Painted on a rock was a sign that Jack had seen before.

THIS IS PETE DINSMORE'S ROAD—
TAKE ANOTHER.

He grinned reminiscently. "I did last time. I took the back trail under orders."

"Whose orders?" asked Ridley.

"Pete's, I reckon."

"If there's a story goes with that grin—" suggested Arthur.

"No story a-tall. I caught a fellow brandin' a calf below the cañon. He waved me around. Some curious to see who the guy was that did n't want to say 'How?' to me, I followed him into Box."

That seemed to be the end of the yarn. At any rate, Jack stopped.

"Well, did you find out who he was?"

"No, but I found this sign, an' above it a rifle slantin' down at me, an' back of the rifle a masked face. The fellow that owned the face advised me about my health."

"What about it?"

"Why, that this rough country was n't suited to my disposition, temperament, an' general proclivities. So I p'inted back to where I had come from."

"And you never satisfied your curiosity about who the rustler was?"

"Did n't I?" drawled Jack.

"Did you?"

"Mebbe I did. I'm not tellin' that yarn — not to-day."

The country was rougher and hillier. The trail they had been following died away in the hills, but they crossed and recrossed others, made by buffaloes, antelopes, and coyotes driven by the spur of their needs in the years that had passed. Countless generations of desert life had come and gone before even the Indians drifted in to live on the buffalo.

"Why is it that there 's more warfare on the desert than there is back East? The cactus has spines. The rattlesnake, the centipede, the Gila monster, the tarantula, all carry poison. Even the toad has a horn. Everywhere it is a fight to survive. The vegetation, as well as the animal life, fights all the time against drought. It 's a regular hell on earth," Arthur concluded.

Jack eased himself in the saddle. "Looks kinda like Nature made the desert an' grinned at life, much as to say, 'I defy you to live there,' don't it? Sure there 's warfare, but I reckon there 's always war between different forms of life. If there was n't, the world would be rank with all sorts of things crowdin' each other. The war would have to come then after all. Me, I like it. I like the way life came back with an answer to the challenge. It equipped itself with spines an'

stings an' horns an' tough hides because it had to have 'em. It developed pores an' stomachs that could get along without much water. Who wants to live in a land where you don't have to rustle for a livin'?"

"You belong to the West. You're of it," Ridley said. "If you'd seen the fine grasslands of the East, the beautiful, well-kept farms and the fat stock, you'd understand what I mean. A fellow gets homesick for them."

Roberts nodded. "I've seen 'em an' I understand. Oncet I went back East an' spent three months there. I could n't stand it. I got sick for the whinin' of a rope, wanted to hump over the hills after cows' tails. The nice little farms an' the nice little people with their nice little ways kinda cramped me. I reckon in this ol' world it 's every one to his own taste." His eye swept the landscape. "Looks like there 's water down there. If so, we 'll fall off for a spell an' rest the hawsses."

CHAPTER XXIX

BURNT BRANDS

At the end of the third day of scouting Jack came back to camp late, but jubilant.

"I've found what we're lookin' for, Art. I drifted across a ridge an' looked down into a draw this evenin'. A fellow was ridin' herd on a bunch of cows. They looked to me like a jackpot lot, but I could n't be sure at that distance. I'm gonna find out what brands they carry."

"How?"

"The only way I know is to get close enough to see."

"Can you do that without being noticed?"

"Mebbe I can. The fellow watchin' the herd ain't expectin' visitors. Probably he loafs on the job some of the time. I'm gamblin' he does."

Roberts unloaded from the saddle the hindquarters of a black-tail deer he had shot just before sunset. He cut off a couple of steaks for supper and Ridley raked together the coals of the fire.

"Throw these into a fry-pan, Art, while I picket old Ten-Penny," said Jack. "I'm sure hungry enough to eat a mail sack. I lay up there

in the brush 'most two hours an' that fellow's cookin' drifted to me till I was about ready to march down an' hold him up for it."

"What 's the programme?" asked Arthur later, as they lay on their tarpaulins smoking post-prandial cigarettes.

"I'll watch for a chance, then slip down an' see what 's what. I want to know who the man is an' what brand the stock are carryin'. That 's all. If it works out right mebbe we'll gather in the man an' drive the herd back to town."

"Then I go along, do I?"

"Yes, but probably you stay back in the brush till I signal for you to come down. We'll see how the thing works out."

Ridley lay awake for hours beneath a million stars, unable to get his alert nerves quiet enough for sleep. The crisis of his adventure was near and his active imagination was already dramatizing it vividly. He envied his friend, who had dropped into restful slumber the moment his head touched the saddle. He knew that Roberts was not insensitive. He, too, had a lively fancy, but it was relegated to the place of servant rather than master.

In the small hours Arthur fell into troubled sleep and before his eyes were fully shut — as it seemed to the drowsy man — he was roused by his companion pulling the blankets from under him. Ridley sat up. The soft sounds of the desert

night had died away, the less subdued ones of day showed that another life was astir.

"Time to get up, Sleepy Haid. Breakfast is ready. Come an' get it," called Jack.

They packed their supplies on the extra horse and saddled their mounts. The day was still young when they struck across the plains to the north. The way they took was a circuitous one, for Roberts was following the draws and valleys as far as possible in order to escape observation.

The sun was high in the heavens when he drew up in the rim-rock.

"We'll 'light here an' picket the broncs," he said.

This done, both men examined their rifles and revolvers carefully to guard against any hitch in the mechanism. Then, still following the low country, they worked forward cautiously for another half-mile.

Jack fell back to give the other Ranger final instructions. "There 's a clump of cactus on the summit. We'll lie back o' there. You stay right there when I go forward. If I get the breaks I'll wave you on later. If I don't get 'em you may have to come a-shootin' to help me."

They crept up an incline, wriggling forward on their stomachs the last few yards to the shelter of the cactus on the crest. Before them lay a little valley. On the cactus-covered slope opposite a herd of cattle was grazing. No guard was in sight.

For two hours they lay there silently, watching intently.

"I'll slip down right now an' take a look at the brands," said Jack.

"Had n't I better come too?"

"You stick right where you're at, Art. I might need a friend under cover to do some fancy shootin' for me if the Dinsmores arrived unexpected."

There was no cover on the near slope. Jack made no attempt to conceal himself, but strode swiftly down into the valley. Goosequills ran up and down his spine, for he did not know at what moment a bullet might come singing down at him.

He reached the outgrazers of the herd and identified the A T O brand on half a dozen cows. The brand had been changed by an adroit touch or two of a running-iron. Probably the cattle were being held here until the hair had grown again enough to conceal the fact of a recent burn.

The Ranger circled the herd, moving toward the brow of the land swell. He made the most of the cactus, but there was an emptiness about the pit of his stomach. If some one happened to be watching him, a single shot would make an end of Tex Roberts. His scalp prickled and drew tight, as though some unseen hand were dragging at it.

From one clump to another he slipped, every sense keyed to alertness. The rifle in his hand.

resting easily against the right hip, could be lifted instantly.

At the top of the rise the Ranger waited behind a prickly pear to search the landscape. It rolled away in long low waves to the horizon. A mile or more away, to the left, a faint, thin film of smoke hung lazily in the air. This meant a camp. The rustlers, to play safe, had located it not too near the grazing herd. It was a place, no doubt, where water was handy and from which the outlaws, if caught by surprise, could make a safe and swift retreat to the rim-rock.

Again, in a wide circuit in order not to meet anybody who might be riding from the camp to the herd, the Ranger moved forward warily. The smoke trickle was his guide and his destination.

He took his time. He was in no hurry. Speed was the least part of his programme. Far more important was secrecy. With that patience which the frontiersman has learned from the Indian he followed a tortuous course through the brush.

His trained eye told him the best direction for approach, the side from which he could get nearest to the camp with the least risk of being seen. Through the curly mesquite he crawled, hiding behind the short bushlike clumps until he had chosen the next line of advance. At last, screened by a Spanish bayonet, he commanded a view of the camp.

So far as he could tell it was deserted. Camp

equipment lay scattered about. A frying-pan, a coffee-pot, tin cups and plates, had been dropped here and there. The coals of the fire still smouldered and gave forth a wisp of smoke. Fifty yards away a horse was picketed. It was an easy guess that the campers had not gone permanently, but were away from home for a few hours.

Where were they? Recalling the horses he and his companion had left picketed not far away, Jack felt a momentary qualm. If the Dinsmores should happen to stumble on them the situation would be an awkward one. The hunters would become the hunted. Deprived of their horses and supplies, the Rangers would be at a decided disadvantage. The only option left them would be to come to close quarters with the rustlers or to limp back home discouraged and discredited. Roberts preferred not to have his hand forced. He wanted to wait on opportunity and see what it brought him.

He moved forward to the camp and made a swift examination of it. Several men had slept here last night and four had eaten breakfast a few hours since. He could find no extra supplies, which confirmed his opinion that this was only a temporary camp of a night or two. A heavy buzzing of flies in a buffalo wallow not far away drew his steps. The swarm covered a saddle of deer from which enough for a meal had been slashed before it was thrown away.

The Ranger moved nothing. He left no signs other than his tracks to show that a stranger had been at the camp. As soon as he had inspected it he withdrew.

He had decided that the first thing to do was to join Ridley, make sure of their horses, and leave his companion in charge of them. Afterward he could return alone and watch the rustlers.

Since he knew that the rustlers were away from their camp, the Ranger did not feel the need of taking such elaborate precautions against discovery during the return journey. He made a wide circuit, but his long, easy stride carried him swiftly over the ground. Swinging round the valley in which the herd was grazing, he came up from the rear to the brush-covered summit where he had left Ridley.

Arthur had gone. He was nowhere in sight. Nor was there any sign to show where he had gone.

It was possible that some alarm might have sent him back to look after the horses. Jack ran down the incline to the little draw where the animals had been picketed. The broncos were safe, but Ridley was not with them.

CHAPTER XXX

ROGUES DISAGREE

With a heart that pounded queerly Arthur watched his friend cross the valley and work his way to the ridge beyond. Even after Jack had disappeared, he waited, nerves jumpy, for the crack of a rifle to carry news of death in the mesquite.

No tidings of tragedy came. The minutes fulfilled the hour. The many small sounds of the desert were shattered by no report. At last, drowsing in the warmth of the sunlit land, the Ranger's eyes closed, opened, and shut again. He nodded, fell asleep.

When he awakened it was with a shock of dread. His heart died. Four men were watching him. Two of them had him covered with revolvers. A third was just removing noiselessly his rifle and six-shooter from reach of his hand.

He jumped to his feet. The consternation in his eyes showed how completely he had been caught napping.

One of the men — a long, lank, cross-eyed fellow — laughed mockingly, and the sound of his mirth was evil.

"Whatta you doin' here?" demanded one whom he recognized as Pete Dinsmore.

For a moment the Ranger's mind was a blank. He could not make it serve his needs. Words were out of reach of his tongue. Then, "I'm lost," he stammered.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes." Out of his confusion one idea stood up imperatively. He must not betray Jack.

"Where's yore hawss?"

"It — it got away from me."

"When?"

"Last night." It seemed to him that he could keep just one jump ahead of this dominant man's menacing questions.

"Howcome that?"

"I shot a prairie-hen, and when I got down to get it — I don't know — my horse got frightened and jerked away. I tried to catch it. The brute would n't let me. Then night came."

"What were you doin' so far from town?" cut in one of the two who were covering him. He was a short, heavy-set man.

"That's right, Dave. Looks funny to me." Gurley seemed fairly to ooze malice. "Just happened to drift here to this herd, I reckon. It sure was yore unlucky day."

Arthur looked from one to another despairingly. He found no hope anywhere, not even in the expressionless face of Homer Dinsmore, who as yet had not spoken a word. There came over the boy what he afterward described as a "gone"

feeling. It was the sensation, intensified many times, felt when an elevator drops from under one in swift descent.

"I — don't know what you mean," he faltered.

"You will," said Gurley brutally.

"Been across the valley to the herd yet?" asked Overstreet, elaborately careless.

Here was one question Ridley could answer with the truth. He spoke swiftly, eagerly. "No."

His questioner exchanged looks with Homer Dinsmore and laughed. The Ranger had betrayed himself. He had been so quick to deny that he had been near the herd that his anxiety gave him away. They knew he suspected them of having rustled the stock grazing on the slope. Very likely he had already verified his doubts as to burnt brands.

Homer Dinsmore spoke for the first time. His voice was harsh. "Why don't you tell the truth? You came to get evidence against us."

"Evidence?" repeated Arthur dully.

"To prove we're rustlin' stock. You know damn well."

"Why, I — I —"

"And you didn't come alone. Ellison never sent a tenderfoot like you out except with others. Where are the rest of yore party? Come through."

"I'm alone." Arthur stuck to that doggedly.

"If he's got a bunch of Rangers back of him

we better burn the wind outa here," suggested Gurley, looking around uneasily.

Overstreet looked at him with scorn and chewed tobacco imperturbably. "Keep yore shirt on, Steve. Time enough to holler when you're hurt."

"I have n't got a bunch of Rangers with me," cried Ridley desperately, beads of sweat on his brow. It had come to him that if he persuaded these men he had no companions with him he would be sealing his doom. They could murder him with impunity. But he could not betray Jack. He must set his teeth to meet the worst before he did that. "I tell you I'm alone. I don't know what you mean about the cattle. I have n't been across the valley. I came here, and I had n't slept all night. So I was all worn out. And somehow I fell asleep."

"All alone, eh?" Pete Dinsmore murmured it suavely. His crafty mind was weighing the difference this made in the problem before the outlaws — the question as to what to do with this man. They could not let him go back with his evidence. It would not be safe to kill him if he had merely strayed from a band of Rangers. But assuming he told the truth, that he had no companions, then there was a very easy and simple way out for the rustlers. The Ranger could not tell what he knew — however much or little that might be — *if he never returned to town.*

"I keep telling you that I'm alone, that I got lost," Arthur insisted. "What would I be doing here without a horse if I had friends?"

"Tha's right," agreed Gurley. "I reckon he got lost like he said."

He, too, by the same process of reasoning as Pete Dinsmore, had come to a similar conclusion. He reflected craftily that Ridley was probably telling the truth. Why should he persist in the claim that he was alone if he had friends in the neighborhood, since to persuade his captors of this was to put himself wholly in their power?

"You're easily fooled, Steve," sneered Homer. "I've camped with this bird, an' I tell you he's got a passel of Rangers with him somewheres. We're standin' here jawin' waitin' for them to round us up, I reckon."

Overstreet looked at Homer. His eyebrows lifted in a slight surprise. He and the younger Dinsmore had been side partners for years. Homer was a cool customer. It was n't like him to scare. There was something in this he did not understand. Anyhow, he would back his pal's play till he found out.

"I expect you're right. We can easy enough prove it. Let's light out for the cap-rock an' hole up for a coupla days. Then one of us will slip out an' see if the herd's still here an' no Rangers in sight. We'll keep this gent a prisoner till we know where we're at? How's that?"

"You talk like we was the United States Army, Dave," growled Pete Dinsmore. "We got no way to take care o' prisoners. I'm for settlin' this thing right here."

The outlaws drew closer together and farther from Ridley. He was unarmed and wholly in their power. If he tried to run he could not get twenty yards. The voices of the men fell.

Arthur began to tremble. His face grew gray, his lips bloodless. On the issue of that conference his life hung. The easiest thing to do would be to make an end of him now. Would they choose that way out of the difficulty? He could see that Gurley had, for the moment at least, joined forces with Homer and Dave Overstreet against Pete, but he could hear none of the arguments.

"You're wrong, Pete. We're playin' safe. That's all. My notion is this guy's tellin' the truth. There's only one thing to do. I don't reckon any of us want him to go back to town. But if we do anything with him here, the Rangers are liable to find his body. Oncet up in the caprock we can dry-gulch him."

The older Dinsmore gave way with an oath. "All right. Have yore own way, boys. Majority rules. We'll postpone this discussion till later."

Gurley brought the horses. Arthur was mounted behind him, his feet tied beneath the belly of the horse. The rustlers rode in pairs, Homer Dinsmore and Overstreet in the rear.

"What makes you think this fellow has friends near, Homer?" asked his companion.

"He does n't know enough to ride alone. But I don't care whether he 's alone or not. I 'm not goin' to have the boy killed. He stood by me on the island to a finish. Of course that would n't go with Steve an' Pete, so I put it on the other ground."

"Want to turn him loose, do you?"

"I'd swear him first to padlock his mouth. He'd do it, too, if he said so."

"Some risk that, old-timer."

"I got to do it, Dave. Can't throw him down, can I?"

"Don't see as you can. Well, make yore play when you get ready. I'll shove my chips in beside yours. I never yet killed a man except in a fight an' I've got no fancy for beginnin' now."

"Much obliged, Dave."

"How far do you 'low to go? If Pete gets ugly like he sometimes does, he'll be onreasonable."

"I'll manage him. If he does get set there'll be a pair of us. Mebbe I 'm just about as stubborn as he is."

"I believe you. Well, I'll be with you at every jump of the road," Overstreet promised.

The discussion renewed itself as soon as the outlaws had hidden themselves in a pocket of the cap-rock. Again they drew apart from their prisoner and talked in excited but reduced voices.

"The Rangers have got no evidence we collected this fellow," argued Gurley. "Say he disappears off'n the earth. Mebbe he died of thirst lost on the plains. Mebbe a buffalo bull killed him. Mebbe —"

"Mebbe he went to heaven in a chariot of fire," drawled Overstreet, to help out the other's imagination.

"The point is, why should we be held responsible? Nobody knows we were within fifty miles of him, doggone it."

"That 's where you 're wrong. The Rangers know it. They 're right on our heels, I tell you," differed Homer Dinsmore.

"We 'll get the blame. No manner o' doubt about that," said Overstreet.

"Say we do. They can't prove a thing — not a thing."

"You talk plumb foolish, Steve. Why don't you use yore brains?" answered Homer impatiently. "We can go just so far. If we overstep the limit this country will get too hot for us. There 'll be a grand round-up, an' we 'd get ours without any judge or jury. The folks of this country are law-abidin', but there 's a line we can't cross."

"That 's all right," agreed Pete. "But there 's somethin' in what Steve says. If this tenderfoot wandered off an' got lost, nobody 's goin' to hold us responsible for him."

"He did n't no such thing get lost. Listen Tex Roberts was with him the day Steve — fell over the box. Tex was with him when we had the rumpus with the Kiowas on the Canadian. Those lads hunt together. Is it likely this Ridley, who don't know sic' 'em, got so far away from the beaten trails alone? Not in a thousand years There 's a bunch of Rangers somewheres near. We got to play our hands close, Pete."

"We're millin' around in circles, Homer. Why does this fellow Ridley claim he 's alone? He must know it 's up to him to persuade us his friends are about two jumps behind us."

"One guess is as good as another. Here 's mine," said Overstreet. "He wants to throw us off our guard. He 's hopin' we'll pull some fool break an' the Rangers will make a gather of our whole bunch."

"Good enough," said Homer, nodding agreement. "Another thing. This lad Ridley 's not game. But he 's a long way from bein' yellow. He 's not gonna queer the campaign of the Rangers by tellin' what he knows."

"Betcha I can make him talk," boasted Gurley. "Put a coupla sticks between the roots of his fingers an' press —"

"Think we're a bunch of 'Paches, Steve?" demanded Homer roughly. "Come to that, I'll say plain that I'm no murderer, let alone torture. I've killed when I had to, but the other

fellow had a run for his money. If I beat him to the draw that was his lookout. He had no holler comin'. But this kid — not for me."

"Different here," said Pete evenly. "He knew what he was up against when he started. If it was us or him that had to go, I would n't hesitate a minute. Question is, what 's safest for us?"

"The most dangerous thing for us is to harm him. Do that, an' we won't last a month in this country."

"What 's yore idea, then, Homer? We can't hold him till Christmas. Soon as we let him go, he'll trot back an' tell all he knows," protested his brother irritably.

"What does he know? Nothin' except that we found him when he claimed to be lost an' that we looked after him an' showed him how to get home. Even if he 's seen those cattle he can't prove we burned the brands, can he?"

"No-o."

"In a day or two we'll take the trail. I'll put it to Ridley that we have n't time to take him back to town an' that he'd sure get lost if we turned him loose here. We'll drop him somewheres on the trail after we've crossed the line."

"Fine an' dandy," jeered Gurley. "We'll introduce him to the herd an' take him along so 's he'll be sure we're the rustlers."

They wrangled back and forth, covering the

same ground time and again. At last they agreed to postpone a decision till next day.

Homer reported the issue of their debate, colored to suit his purpose, to the white-faced Ranger. "I reckon we'll have to look out for you, Ridley. It would n't do to turn you loose. You'd get lost sure. Mebbe in a day or two some of us will be driftin' in to town an' can take you along."

"If you'd start me in the right direction I think I could find my way back," Arthur said timidly.

"No chance, young fellow. You'll stay right here till we get good an' ready for you to go. See?"

The Ranger did not push the point. He knew very well it would not be of the least use. His fears were temporarily allayed. He felt sure that Homer Dinsmore would put up a stiff argument before he would let him be sacrificed.

CHAPTER XXXI

A PAIR OF DEUCES

FROM the lookout point among the rocks where he was stationed Overstreet shouted a warning to his companions below.

"Fellow with a white flag ridin' in. Looks like he might be a Ranger."

Pete Dinsmore dropped a coffee-pot and took three strides to his rifle. His brother Homer and Steve Gurley garnished themselves promptly with weapons. They joined the lookout, and from the big rocks could see without being seen.

The man coming to their hang-out had a handkerchief or a flour sack tied to the barrel of his rifle and was holding it in the air. He jogged along steadily without any haste and without any apparent hesitation. He was leading a saddled riderless horse.

A rifle cracked.

Pete Dinsmore whirled on Gurley angrily. "What you do that for?"

Malice, like some evil creature, writhed in Gurley's face. "It 's that fellow Roberts. We got him right at last. Leggo my arm."

"I'll beat yore head off if you shoot again. Lucky for you you missed. Don't you see he comes here as a messenger. Ellison musta sent him."

"I don' care how he comes. He'll never go away except feet first." The man who had been horsewhipped by the Ranger was livid with rage.

Dinsmore swung him round by the shoulder savagely. "Who elected you boss of this outfit, Steve? Don't ride on the rope or you'll sure git a fall."

The eyes of Pete were blazing. Gurley gave way sullenly.

"Tha's all right. I ain't aimin' noways to cross you. I can wait to git this fellow if you say so."

The Ranger had pulled up his horse and was waving the improvised flag. Pete gave directions.

"Homer, you an' Dave go down an' find out what he wants. Don't bring him in unless you blindfold him first. We don't wanta introduce him to the place so as he can walk right in again any time."

The two men named walked out to meet the Ranger. They greeted him with grim little nods, which was exactly the salutation he gave them. The hard level eyes of the men met without yielding an eyebeat.

"Don't you know a flag of truce when you see it, Dinsmore?" demanded Roberts.

"Excuse that shot, Mr. Ranger," said Homer evenly. "It was a mistake."

"Gurley does make 'em," returned Jack, guessing shrewdly. "Some day he'll make one too many."

"I take it you came on business."

"Why, yes. Captain Ellison sent me with his compliments to get Ranger Ridley."

"Lost him, have you?"

"You can't exactly call him lost when we know where he is."

"Meanin' that he 's here?"

"You ring the bell first shot."

Overstreet broke in, to mark time. "You think we've got him?"

"We do. Don't you?"

"And Ellison wants him, does he?"

"Wants him worse 'n a heifer cow does her calf." Roberts laughed softly, as though from some fund of inner mirth. "He 's kinda hopin' you'll prove stubborn so as to give him a chance to come an' get him."

"Where is Ellison?"

The Ranger smiled. "He did n't give me any instructions about tellin' you where he is."

"H'mp! You can come in an' talk with Pete. We'll have to blindfold you," said Dinsmore.

The envoy made no objections. He dismounted. A bandana was tied across his eyes, and the men led him into the pocket of rock. The handkerchief was removed.

Jack told again what he had come for.

"How did you know we were here?" demanded Pete.

"It 's our business to know such things." Jack

did not think it wise to mention that he had been here once before, the same day he found Rutherford Wadley's body a few miles away at the foot of a bluff.

"Ridley told us he was alone — no Rangers a-tall with him, he said."

"Did he?" Jack showed amusement. "What did you expect him to tell you? He draws pay as a Ranger."

"What 's Ellison's proposition?"

"Captain Ellison has n't any proposition to make, if by that you mean compromise. You 're to turn Ridley over to me. That 's all."

"An' where do we get off?" snorted Pete. "What does that buy us?"

"It buys you six hours' time for a get-away. I've got no business to do it, but I'll promise to loaf around an' not report to Captain Ellison till after noon. I'll go that far."

"I don' know 's we want to make any get-away. We could hold the fort right here against quite a few Rangers, I reckon."

"Suit yourself," said Jack indifferently.

Pete chewed tobacco slowly and looked down sullenly at a flat rock without seeing it. Anger burned in him like a smouldering fire in peat. He hated this man Roberts, and Ellison he regarded as a natural enemy. Nothing would have pleased him more than to settle his feud with the Ranger on the spot with a six-shooter. But that

meant a hurried exit from the Panhandle at a sacrifice of his accumulated profits. This did not suit Dinsmore's plans. His purpose was to leave Texas with enough money to set him up in business in Colorado or Wyoming. It would not do to gratify his revenge just now. Nor did he dare to carry out his threat and let the Rangers attack him. His policy was to avoid any conflict if possible.

"Have to talk it over with the other boys," he said abruptly. "You wait here."

Jack sat down on a rock while the rustlers retired and discussed the situation. There was not room for much difference of opinion. The Rangers had forced their hand. All they could do was to slip out of the rim-rock and make for another zone of safety. This would involve losing the stock they had rustled, but their option was a choice of two evils and this was decidedly the lesser.

Pete announced their decision truculently, his chin thrust out.

"One of these days we'll tangle, you 'n' me, young fellow. But not to-day. Take Ridley an' git out *pronto* before I change my mind. For a plug of tobacco I'd go to foggin' the air right now."

The prisoner was brought forward. His weapons were restored to him. With the long strain of fear lifted at last from his mind, it was hard

for him to keep down a touch of hysterical joy. But he managed to return Jack's casual greeting with one as careless to all appearance.

He had caught the drift of the talk and he played up to his friend promptly. "I was rather lookin' for you or one of the other boys about now, Jack," he said. "Mighty careless of me to get nabbed asleep."

Ten minutes later the two Rangers were outside the pocket riding across the plain.

"Hope Pete won't change his mind an' plump a few bullets at us. He 's a right explosive proposition," said Roberts.

It was all Arthur could do to keep from quickening the pace. His mind would n't be easy until several miles lay between him and his late captors.

"Where 's Captain Ellison waiting?" asked Ridley.

"He 's probably at Tascosa or Mobeetie. I have n't seen him since you have."

"Did n't he send you to the Dinsmores after me?"

"Why, no."

Arthur drew a deep breath of relief. If he had weakened in his story that he was alone and had told the truth, he would have brought ruin upon both himself and his friend.

"You mean you went in there on a pure bluff, knowing how they hated you and what a big chance there was that they would murder you?"

"I took a chance, I reckon. But it looked good to me."

"If I had told them you and I were alone —"

"I figured you would n't do that. I had a notion my bluff would stick. They would n't think I'd come to them unless I had strong backin'. The bigger the bluff the better the chance of its workin'."

"Unless I had told that there were only two of us."

"That was one of the risks I had to gamble on, but I felt easy in my mind about that. You'll notice one thing if you stay with the Rangers, Art. They can get away with a lot of things they could n't pull off as private citizens. The law is back of us, and back of the law is the State of Texas. When it comes to a showdown, mighty few citizens want to get us after them good and hard. We always win in the end. The bad-men all know that."

"Just the same, for cold nerve I never saw the beat of what you did now."

"Sho! Nothin' to that. A pair of deuces is good as a full house when your hand ain't called. We'll swing over to the left here an' gather up that bunch of rustled stock, Art."

Late that afternoon, as they were following the dust of the drive, Ridley voiced a doubt in his heart.

"Is n't there a chance that the Dinsmores will follow us and find out we're alone?"

"Quite a chance," agreed Jack cheerfully. "If so, we're liable to swap bullets yet. But I don't reckon they'll do that hardly. More likely they're hittin' the trail for Palo Duro to hole up."

The outlaws did not molest them during the drive. Four days later they reached town with their thirsty, travel-worn herd.

Captain Ellison was at the hotel and Jack reported to him at once.

The eyes of the little Ranger Chief gleamed. "Good boys, both of you. By dog, the old man won't write me any more sassy letters when he reads what you done. I always did say that my boys —"

" — Were a bunch of triflin' scalawags," Jack reminded him.

The Captain fired up, peppery as ever. "You light outa here and see if a square meal won't help some, you blamed impudent young rascal."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HOLD-UP

When Wadley made to Jack Roberts the offer he had spoken of to his daughter, the face of that young man lighted up at once. But without hesitation he refused the chance to manage the A T O ranch.

"Sorry, but I can't work for you, Mr. Wadley."

The big Texan stiffened. "All right," he said huffily. "Just as you please. I'm not goin' to beg you on my knees to take the best job in the Panhandle. Plenty of good men want it."

The frank smile of the Ranger was disarming. "They don't want it any worse than I do, Mr. Wadley. I'm not a fool. Just because we had a difference oncet, I'm not standin' on my dignity. Nothin' like that. You're offerin' me a big chance — the biggest I'm ever likely to get. When you pick me to boss the A T O under yore orders, you pay me a sure-enough compliment, an' I'd be plumb glad to say yes."

"Well, why don't you?"

"Because the Rangers have got an unfinished job before them here, an' I'm not goin' to leave Captain Ellison in the lurch. I'll stick to my dollar a day till we've made a round-up."

The cattleman clapped him on the shoulder. "That 's right, boy. That 's the way to talk. Make yore clean-up, then come see me. I won't promise to hold this job open, but I want you to talk with me before you sign up with any one else."

But the weeks passed, and the Dinsmores still operated in the land. They worked under cover, less openly than in the old days, but still a storm-center of trouble. It was well known that they set the law at defiance, but no man who could prove it would produce evidence.

Meanwhile spring had made way for summer, and summer was beginning to burn into autumn. The little force of Rangers rode the land and watched for that false move which some day the Dinsmores would make to bring them within reach of the law.

On one of its trips in the early fall, the Clarendon stage left town almost half an hour late. It carried with it a secret, but everybody on board had heard a whisper of it. There was a gold shipment in the box consigned to Tascosa. A smooth-faced Ranger sat beside the driver with a rifle across his knees. He had lately been appointed to the force, and this was one of his first assignments. Perhaps that was why Arthur Ridley was a little conscious of his new buckskin suit and the importance of his job.

The passengers were three. One was a jolly Irish mule-skinner with a picturesque vocabulary

and an inimitable brogue. The second wore the black suit and low-crowned hat of a clergyman, and yellow goggles to protect his eyes from the sun. He carried a roll of Scriptural charts such as are used in Sunday-Schools. The third was an angular and spectacled schoolmarm, for Tascosa was going to celebrate by starting a school.

Most of those on board were a trifle nervous. The driver was not quite at his ease; nor was the shotgun messenger. For somehow word had got out a day or two in advance of the gold shipment that it was to be sent on that date. The passengers, too, had faint doubts about the wisdom of going to Tascosa on that particular trip.

The first twenty miles of the journey were safely covered. The stage drew near to the place where now is located the famous Goodnight cattalo ranch.

From the farther side of a cut in the road came a sharp order to the driver. Two men had ridden out from the brush and were moving beside the stage. Each of them carried a rifle.

The driver leaned backward on the reins with a loud "Whoa!" It was an article of faith with him never to argue with a road-agent.

Ridley swung round to fire. From the opposite side of the road a shot rang out. Two more horsemen had appeared. The reins slid from the hands of the driver, and he himself from the seat. His body struck the wheel on the way to the ground.

The bullet intended for the armed guard had passed through his head.

In the packed moments that followed, a dozen shots were fired, most of them by the outlaws, two by the man on the box. A bullet struck Arthur in the elbow, and the shock of it for a time paralyzed his arm. The rifle clattered against the singletree in its fall. But the shortest of the outlaws was sagging in his saddle and clutching at the pommel to support himself.

From an unexpected quarter there came a diversion. With one rapid gesture the man in the clergyman's garb had brushed aside his yellow goggles; with another he had stripped the outer cover of charts from his roll and revealed a sawed-off shotgun. As he stepped down to the road, he fired from his hip. The whole force of the load of buckshot took the nearest outlaw in the vitals and lifted him from his horse. Before he struck the ground he was dead.

In the flash of an eye the tide of battle had turned. The surprise of seeing the clergyman galvanized into action tipped the scale. One moment the treasure lay unguarded within reach of the outlaws; the next saw their leader struck down as by a bolt from heaven.

The lank bandit ripped out a sudden oath of alarm from behind the handkerchief he wore as a mask and turned his horse in its tracks. He dug home his spurs and galloped for the brow of the

fall. The other unwounded robber backed away more deliberately, covering the retreat of his injured companion. Presently they, too, had passed over the top of the hill and disappeared.

The ex-clergyman turned to the treasure-guard. "How bad is it with you, Art?" he asked gently.

That young man grinned down a little wanly at Jack Roberts. He felt suddenly nauseated and ill. This business of shooting men and being shot at filled him with horror.

"Not so bad. I got it in the arm, Jack. Poor old Hank will never drive again."

The Ranger who had been camouflaged as a clergyman stooped to examine the driver. That old-timer's heart had stopped beating. "He 's gone on his last long trip, Art."

"This schoolmarm lady has fainted," announced the mule-skinner.

"She 's got every right in the world to faint. In Iowa, where she comes from, folks live in peace. Better sprinkle water on her face, Mike."

Jack moved over to the dead outlaw and lifted the bandana mask from the face. "Pete Dinsmore, just like I thought," he told Ridley. "Well, he had to have it — could n't learn his lesson any other way."

Roberts drove the stage with its load of dead and wounded back to Clarendon. As quickly as possible he gathered a small posse to follow the

bandits. Hampered as the outlaws were with a badly wounded man, there was a good chance of running them to earth at last. Before night he and his deputies were far out on the plains following a trail that led toward Palo Duro Cañon.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE MAN WITH THE YELLOW STREAK

NIGHT fell on both a dry and fireless camp for the outlaws who had tried to rob the Clarendon-Tascosa stage. They had covered a scant twenty miles instead of the eighty they should have put behind them. For Dave Overstreet had been literally dying in the saddle every step of the way.

He had clenched his teeth and clung to the pommel desperately. Once he had fainted and slid from his seat. But the bandits could not stop and camp, though Dinsmore kept the pace to a walk.

"Once we reach Palo Duro, we'll hole up among the rocks an' fix you up fine, Dave," his companion kept promising.

"Sure, Homer. I'm doin' dandy," the wounded man would answer from white, bloodless lips.

The yellow streak in Gurley was to the fore all day. It evidenced itself in his precipitate retreat from the field of battle — a flight which carried him miles across the desert before he dared wait for his comrades. It showed again in the proposal which he made early in the afternoon to Dinsmore.

The trio of outlaws had been moving very slowly on account of the suffering of the wounded

man. Gurley kept looking back nervously every few minutes to see if pursuers were visible. After a time he sidled up to Dinsmore and spoke low.

"They'll get us sure if we don't move livelier, Homer."

"How in Mexico can we move faster when Dave can't stand it?" asked Dinsmore impatiently.

"He's a mighty sick man. He had n't ought to be on horseback at all. He needs a doctor."

"Will you go an' get him one?" demanded Homer with sour sarcasm.

"What I say is, let's fix him up comfortable, an' after a while mebbe a posse will come along an' pick him up. They can look after him better than we got a chance to do," argued Gurley.

"And mebbe a posse won't find him — what then?" rasped Dinsmore.

"They will. If they don't, he'll die easy. This is sure enough hell for him now."

"All right. Shall we stop right here with him?"

"That would n't do any good, Homer. The Rangers would get us too."

"I see. Yore idea is to let Dave die easy while we're savin' our hides. Steve, you've got a streak in you a foot wide."

"Nothin' like that, "protested the man with the eyes that did n't track. "I'd stay by him if it was any use. But it ain't. Whyfor should you an' me stretch a rope when we can't help Dave a mite? It ain't reasonable."

Overstreet could not hear what was said, but he guessed the tenor of their talk. "Go ahead, boys, an' leave me. I'm about done anyhow," he said.

"If Gurley has a mind to go, he can. I'll stick," answered Dinsmore gruffly.

But Gurley did not want to go alone. There were possible dangers to be faced that two men could meet a good deal more safely than one. It might be that they would have to stand off a posse. They might meet Indians. The sallow outlaw felt that he could not afford just now to break with his companion. It was not likely that the Rangers would reach them that night, and he guessed craftily that Overstreet would not live till morning. The wound was a very serious one. The man had traveled miles before Dinsmore could stop to give him such slight first aid as was possible, and the jolting of the long horseback ride had made it difficult to stop the bleeding which broke out again and again.

After Dinsmore had eased the wounded man from his horse at dusk and laid him on a blanket with a saddle for a pillow, Overstreet smiled faintly up at him.

"It won't be for long, Homer. You'll be shet of me right soon now," he murmured.

"Don't you talk thataway, Dave. I don't want to be shet of you. After a good night's rest you'll feel a new man."

"No, I've got more than I can pack. It won't be long now. I'm right comfortable here. Steve 's in a hurry. You go on an' hit the trail with him."

"Where did you get the notion I was yellow, old-timer? I've hunted in couples with you for years. Do you reckon I'm goin' to run like a cur now you've struck a streak o' bad luck?" asked Dinsmore huskily.

The dying man smiled his thanks. "You always was a stubborn son-of-a-gun, Homer. But Steve, he wants —"

"Steve can go to — Hell Creek, if he 's so set on travelin' in a hurry. Here, drink some of this water."

The blanket of darkness fell over the land. Stars came out, at first one or two, then by thousands, till the night was full of them. The wounded man dozed and stirred and dozed again. It was plain that the sands of his life were running low. Dinsmore, watching beside him, knew that it was the ebb tide.

A little after midnight Overstreet roused himself, recognized the watcher, and nodded goodbye.

"So long, Homer. I'm hittin' the home trail now."

His hand groped feebly till it found that of his friend. A few minutes later he died, still holding the strong warm hand of the man who was nursing him.

Dinsmore crossed the hands of the dead outlaw and covered him with a blanket.

"Saddle up, Steve," he told Gurley.

While he waited for the horses, he looked down with a blur over his eyes. He had ridden hard and crooked trails all his life, but he had lost that day his brother and his best friend. The three of them had been miscreants. They had broken the laws of society and had fought against it because of the evil in them that had made them a destructive force. But they had always played fair with each other. They had at least been loyal to their own bad code. Now he was alone, for Gurley did not count.

Presently the other man stood at his elbow with the saddled horses. Dinsmore swung to the saddle and rode away. Not once did he look back, but he had no answer for Gurley's cheerful prediction that now they would reach Palo Duro Cañon all right and would hole up there till the pursuit had spent itself, after which they could amble down across the line to Old Mexico or could strike the Pecos and join Billy the Kid. Only one idea was fixed definitely in his mind, that as soon as he could, he would part company with the man riding beside him.

When day came, it found them riding westward in the direction of Deaf Smith County. The Cañon was not far south of them, but there was no need of plunging into it yet. The pursuit must

be hours behind them, even if their trail had not been lost altogether. They rode easily, prepared to camp at the first stream or water-hole they reached.

"We'll throw off here," Dinsmore decided at the first brook they reached.

They unsaddled and hobbled their horses. While Gurley lighted a fire for the coffee, the other man strolled up the creek to get a shot at any small game he might find. Presently a brace of prairie-chickens rose with a whir of wings. The rifle cracked, and one of them fell fluttering to the ground. Dinsmore moved forward to pick up the bird.

Abruptly he stopped in his stride. He fancied he heard a faint cry. It came again, carried on the light morning breeze. He could have sworn that it was the call of a woman for help.

Dinsmore grew wary. He knew the tricks of the Indians, the wily ways with which they lured men into ambush. There had been rumors for days that the Indians were out again. Yet it was not like Indians to announce their presence before they pounced upon their prey. He moved very slowly forward under cover of the brush along the bed of the stream.

The voice came to him again, closer this time, and in spite of the distance clear as a bell. It was surely that of a white woman in trouble. Still he did not answer as he crept forward up the stream.

Then he caught sight of her — a girl, slim and young, stumbling forward through the grass, exhaustion showing in every line of the body.

She stretched out her hands to him across the space between, with a little despairing cry.

CHAPTER XXXIV

RAMONA GOES DUCK-HUNTING

"I'm going duck-hunting, Daddy," announced Ramona one evening at supper. "Quint Sullivan is going with me. We're to get up early in the morning and leave before daybreak."

They had been back at the ranch several weeks, and 'Mona was tired of practicing on the piano and reading Scott's novels after her work about the house was done. She was restless. Her father had noticed it and wondered why. He would have been amazed to learn that the longing to see or hear about a certain brindle-haired former line-rider of his had anything to do with her unrest. Indeed, Ramona did not confess this even to herself. She tried to think that she had been cooped up in the house too long. Hence the duck-hunting as an escape.

"All right, honey. I'll give Quint notice who his boss is to-morrow."

"I've already given him his orders, Dad," his daughter said, with a saucy little *moue* at her father.

Clint chuckled. "'Nough said. When you give orders I take a back seat. Every rider on the place knows that. I'm the most henpecked dad in Texas."

By daybreak Ramona and her escort were several miles from the ranch on their way to the nearest lake. Quint was a black-haired, good-looking youth who rode the range for the A T O outfit. Like most of the unmarried men about her between the ages of fifteen and fifty, he imagined himself in love with the daughter of the boss. He had no expectation whatever of marrying her. He would as soon have thought of asking Wadley to give him a deed to the ranch as he would of mentioning to Ramona the state of his feelings. But that young woman, in spite of her manner of frank innocence, knew quite accurately how matters stood, just as she knew that in due time Quint would transfer his misplaced affections to some more reciprocal object of them.

Her particular reason for selecting Quint as her companion of the day was that he happened to be a devoted admirer of Jack Roberts. All one needed to do was to mention the Ranger to set him off on a string of illustrative anecdotes, and Ramona was hungry for the very sound of his name. One advantage in talking to young Sullivan about his friend was that the ingenuous youth would never guess that the subject of their conversation had been chosen by her rather than by him.

"Did I ever tell you, Miss Ramona, about the time Texas an' me went to Denver? Gentlemen, hush! We ce'tainly had one large time."

"You boys ought not to spend your time in the saloons whenever you go to town. It is n't good for you," reproved the sage young woman who was "going-on seventeen."

She was speaking for a purpose, and Quint very innocently answered the question in her mind.

"No, ma'am. I reckon you're right. But we did n't infest the saloons none that time. Texas, he's one of these here good bad-men. He's one sure-enough tough nut, an' I'd hate to try to crack him, but the queer thing is he don't drink or chew or go hellin' around with the boys. But, say, he's some live lad, lemme tell you. What do you reckon he pulled off on me whilst we was in Denver?"

"Some foolishness, I suppose," said Ramona severely, but she was not missing a word.

"He meets up with a newspaper guy an' gets to fillin' him plumb full o' misinformation about me. To hear him tell it I was the white-haired guy from the Panhandle an' had come to Denver for to hunt a girl to marry. Well, that reporter he goes back an' writes a piece in his paper about how it was the chance of a lifetime for any onmarried fe-male, of even disposition an' pleasin' appearance, between the ages of twenty an' thirty-five, to marry a guaranteed Texas cow-puncher, warranted kind an' sound an' to run easy in double harness. An' would the ladies

please come early to the St. Peter hotel an' inquire for Mr. Quint Sullivan."

"Did any of them come?" asked Ramona, her eyes dancing.

"Did they? Wow! They swarmed up the stairs an' crowded the elevators, while that doggoned Tex sicked 'em on me. Honest, I did n't know there was so many onmarried ladies in the world."

"How did you escape?" asked the girl, well aware that he was drawing the long bow.

"Ma'am, the fire department rescued me. But I ce'tainly did lie awake the balance of the trip tryin' to get even with Jack Roberts. But it 's no manner of use. He lands right-side up every time."

After they had reached Crane Lake the cow-puncher tied the horses while Ramona started around to the far side, following the shore line and keeping her eyes open for ducks. The girl made a half-circuit of the lake without getting a shot. There were ducks enough to be seen, but as yet none of them were within range.

It might have been half an hour after Ramona left Sullivan that there came a shot from the other side of the lake. It was followed almost immediately by a second, a third, and a fourth. 'Mona caught sight of Quint running fast toward the horses. Her heart felt a sudden constriction as of an iron band tightening upon it, for half a dozen mounted Indians were in hot pursuit. She saw the boy reach the nearest bronco, jerk loose

the bridle rein, vault to the saddle, and gallop away, lying low on the back of the horse. The Indians fired from their horses as they rode, but the man flying for his life did not take time to shoot.

For a moment 'Mona stood in plain view by the lake shore. Then she dropped among the rushes, her heart fluttering wildly like that of a forest bird held captive in the hand. She was alone, at the mercy of twoscore of hostile Indians. They would know that the cowboy had a companion because of the second bronco, and as soon as they returned from the pursuit they would begin a search for her. Perhaps they might not even wait till then. 'Mona lay there in despair while one might have counted a hundred. During that time she gave herself up for lost. She could neither move nor think. But presently there flowed back into her heart a faint hope. Perhaps she had not yet been seen. There was a little arroyo farther to the left. If she could reach it, still unnoticed, at least she could then run for her life.

She crept through the rushes on hands and knees, sinking sometimes wrist-deep in water. There was one stretch of perhaps thirty yards at the end of the rushes that had to be taken without cover. She flew across the open, a miracle of supple lightness, reached the safety of the little gulch, and ran as she had never run before. Every moment she expected to hear the crash of the pursuers breaking through the brush.

On the ranch she had lived largely an outdoor life, and in spite of her slenderness was lithe and agile. Beneath her soft flesh hard muscles flowed, for she had known the sting of sleet and the splash of sun. But the rapid climb had set her heart pumping fast. Her speed began to slacken.

Near the summit was a long, uptilted stratum of rock which led to the left and dipped over the ridge. She followed this because no tracks would here betray where she had escaped. For almost a quarter of a mile she descended on the outcropping quartz, flying in an ecstasy of terror from the deadly danger that might at any instant appear on the crest of the divide behind her.

Ramona came to a cleft in the huge boulder, a deep, narrow gash that looked as if it might have been made by a sword stroke of the gods. She peered into the shadowy gulf, but could not see the bottom of the fissure. A pebble dropped by her took so long to strike that she knew the chasm must be deep.

If she could get down into it, perhaps she might hide from the savages. It was her one possible chance of escape. The girl moved along the edge of the precipice trying to find a way down that was not sheer. An arrowweed thicket had struggled up from a jutting spar of rock. Below this was a ridge where her foot might find a support. Beyond was a rock wall that disappeared

into empty space. But 'Mona could not choose. She must take this or nothing.

By means of the arrowweed she lowered herself over the edge while her foot groped for the spar of quartz. Her last look up the hill showed Indians pouring across the ridge in pursuit. Without hesitation she chose the chances of death in the cavern to the certainty of the torture waiting for her outside. Foot by foot she lowered herself, making the most of every irregularity in the rock wall that offered a grip for hand or foot. The distance down seemed interminable. She worked herself into a position where she could move neither up nor down. While her foot was searching for a brace one of her hands slipped and she went the rest of the way with a rush.

For a time she lay there in the darkness, shaken and bruised by the fall, a sharp pain shooting through one of her legs just above the ankle. During those minutes of daze voices came to her from the slit of light above. The painted face of an Apache leaned over the edge of the wall and looked into the gulf.

The girl made not the least movement. She did not stir to relieve the pain of her leg. Scarcely did she dare breathe lest the sound of it might reach those above.

The Apaches began to fire into the fissure. Ramona noiselessly dragged herself close to the overhanging wall. Shot after shot was flung into

the cavern at random. Fortunately for Ramona the strain of the situation relaxed abruptly. A wave of light-headedness seemed to carry her floating into space. She fainted.

When she came to herself no sound reached the girl from above. The Indians had no doubt concluded that their victim was not in the cavern and taken up the pursuit again. But she knew the cunning of the Apache. Probably one or two braves had been left to watch the cleft. She lay quite still and listened. All she could hear was the fearful beating of her heart.

For hours she lay there without making a sound. The patience of the Apache is proverbial. It was possible they knew where she was and were waiting for her to deliver herself to them.

'Mona had one ghastly comfort. The little revolver she had brought along with which to shoot rattlesnakes was still in its scabbard by her side. If they would give her only a moment or two of warning, she would never fall alive into the hands of the redskins.

Time was unmarked for her in the darkness of the cavern. She could not tell whether it was still morning or whether the afternoon was nearing an end. Such a day, so full of dreadful horrors, so long from morning till night, she had never before passed. It seemed to her that a week of hours had come and gone before the light above began to fade.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DESERT

It was only recently that Clint Wadley had become a man of wealth, and life in the Panhandle was even yet very primitive according to present-day standards. There was no railroad within one hundred and fifty miles of the A T O ranch. Once in two weeks one of the cowboys rode to Clarendon to get the mail and to buy small supplies. Otherwise contact with the world was limited to occasional visits to town.

As a little girl Ramona had lived in a one-room house built of round logs, with a stick-and-mud chimney, a door of clapboards daubed with mud at the chinks, and a dirt floor covered with puncheons. She had slept in a one-legged bedstead fitted into the wall, through the sides and ends of which bed, at intervals of eight inches, holes had been bored to admit of green rawhide strips for slats. She had sat on a home-made three-legged stool at a home-made table in homespun clothes and eaten a dish of cush[1] for her supper. She had watched her aunt make soap out of lye dripping from an ash-hopper. The only cooking utensils in the house had been a Dutch oven, a three-legged

[1] Cush is made of old corn bread and biscuits in milk, beaten to a batter and fried in bacon grease with salt.

skillet, a dinner-pot, a tea-kettle, a big iron shovel, and a pair of pot-hooks suspended from an iron that hung above the open fire.

But those were memories of her childhood in southern Texas. With the coming of prosperity Clint had sent his children to Tennessee to school, and Ramona had been patiently trained to the feebleness of purpose civilization in those days demanded of women of her class and section. She had been taught to do fancy needlework and to play the piano as a parlor accomplishment. It had been made plain to her that her business in life was to marry and keep the home fires burning, and her schooling had been designed, not to prepare her as a mate for her future husband, but to fit her with the little graces that might entice him into choosing her for a wife.

Upon her return to the ranch Ramona had compromised between her training and her inheritance. She took again to horseback riding and to shooting, even though she read a good deal and paid due attention to her pink-and-white complexion.

So that when she looked up from the cavern in which she was buried and caught a gleam of a star in the slit of blue sky above, she was not so helpless as her schooling had been designed to make her. The girl was compact of supple strength. Endurance and a certain toughness of fiber had come to her from old Clint Wadley.

She began the climb, taking advantage of every bit of roughness, of every projection in the almost sheer wall. A knob of feldspar, a stunted shrub growing from a crevice, a fault in the rock structure, offered here and there toe- or hand-holds. She struggled upward, stopped more than once by the smooth surface against which her soft warm body was pressing. On such occasions she would lower herself again, turn to the right or the left, and work toward another objective.

Ramona knew that the least slip, the slightest failure of any one of her muscles, would send her plunging down to the bottom of the crevasse. The worst of it was that she could not put any dependence upon her injured leg. It might see her through or it might not.

It was within a few feet of the top, just below the arrowweed bush, that she came to an *impasse*. The cold wall offered no hand-hold by which she could gain the few inches that would bring her within reach of the bunched roots. She undid her belt, threw one end of it over the body of the bush, and worked it carefully down until she could buckle it. By means of this she went up hand over hand till she could reach the arrowweed. Her knee found support in the loop of the belt, and in another moment she had zigzagged herself inch by inch over the edge to the flat surface above.

No sign of the Apaches was to be seen. 'Mona

recovered her belt and began to move up the rock spur toward the summit of the hill. A sound stopped her in her tracks. It was the beating of a tom-tom.

She knew the Indians must be camped by the lake. They were probably having a feast and dances. In any case she could not strike direct for home. She must keep on this side of the hill, make a wide circuit, and come in from the west.

Already her leg was paining her a good deal. Since five o'clock in the morning she had eaten nothing. Her throat was parched with thirst. But these were details that must be forgotten. She had to tramp more than twenty miles through the desert regardless of her physical condition.

The girl went at it doggedly. She limped along, getting wearier every mile of the way. But it was not until she discovered that she was lost to all sense of direction that she broke down and wept. The land here was creased by swales, one so like another that in the darkness she had gone astray and did not know north from south.

After tears came renewed resolution. She tried to guide herself by the stars, but though she could hold a straight course there was no assurance in her mind that she was going toward the A T O. Each step might be taking her farther from home. A lime kiln burned in her throat. She was so worn out from lack of food and the tremendous strain under which she had been carry-

ing on that her knees buckled under her weight as she stumbled through the sand. The bad ankle complained continuously.

In this vast solitude there was something weird and eerie that shook her courage. Nor was the danger all fantastic imaginings. The Indians might yet discover her. She might wander far from beaten trails of travel and die of thirst as so many newcomers had done. Possibilities of disaster trooped through her mind.

She was still a child, on the sunny side of seventeen. So it was natural that when she sat down to rest her ankle she presently began to sob again, and that in her exhaustion she cried herself to sleep.

When her eyes opened, the sun was peeping over the desert horizon. She could tell directions now. The A T O ranch must be far to the northeast of where she was. But scarcely a mile from her ran a line of straggling brush. It must be watered by a stream. She hobbled forward painfully to relieve the thirst that was already a torment to her.

She breasted the rise of a little hill and looked down a gentle slope toward the thicket. For a moment her heart lost a beat. A trickle of smoke was rising from a camp-fire and a man was bending over it. He was in the clothes of a white man. Simultaneously there came to her the sound of a shot.

From her parched throat there came a bleating little cry. She hurried forward, and as she went she called again and still again. She was pitifully anxious lest the campers ride away before they should discover her.

A man with a gun in his hand moved toward her from the creek. She gave a little sobbing cry and stumbled toward him.

CHAPTER XXXVI

HOMER DINSMORE ESCORTS RAMONA

"I'M lost!" cried Ramona.

"Where from?" asked Dinsmore.

"From the A T O."

"You're Clint Wadley's daughter, then?"

She nodded. "We met Indians. I . . . got away."

The girl knelt beside the brook, put her hands on two stones that jutted up from the water, and drank till her thirst was assuaged.

"I'm hungry," she said simply, after she had risen.

He led her back to the camp-fire and on the way picked up the bird he had shot. 'Mona saw that he noticed her limp, though he said nothing about it.

"I had an accident," she explained. "Fell down a rock wall while I was getting away from the 'Paches."

"They're out again, are they — the devils?" He asked another question. "You said 'we.' Who was with you when the Indians took after you?"

"Quint Sullivan. I was on the other side of Crane Lake from him and heard shots. I saw Quint running for the horses with the 'Paches after him."

"Did he get away?"

She shuddered. "He reached the horses. They rode after him. I don't know whether . . ." Her voice thinned away.

The man at the camp-fire turned, and at sight of them dropped a sudden, startled oath.

Ramona looked at him, then at Dinsmore. A faint tremor passed through her slight body. She knew now who these men were.

"What 's *she* doin' here?" demanded Gurley.

"She 's lost. The 'Paches are out, Steve."

"Where are they?"

"Up at Crane Lake last night."

"Are they headed this way?"

"Don't know. She" — with a jerk of his thumb toward Ramona — "bumped into 'em an' got away."

"We 'd better light a shuck out o' here," said Gurley, visibly disturbed.

"Why? They ain't liable to come this way more than any other. We 'll have breakfast an' talk things over. Fix up this bird, Steve. Cook it in the skillet. She 's hungry."

Ramona observed that both the men referred to her as *she* whenever any reference was made to her.

While they ate breakfast the girl told the story of her experience. Dinsmore watched her with a reluctant admiration. The lines of her figure drooped with weariness, but fatigue could not blot out the grace of her young vitality.

"When can we start for home?" Ramona asked after she had eaten.

"For the A T O?" asked the lank, sallow outlaw brutally. "What's ailin' you? Think we're goin' to take you home with the 'Paches between us an' there? We ain't plumb crazy."

"But I must get home right away. My father — he'll be frightened about me."

"Will he?" jeered Gurley. "If he knew you was in such good company he'd be real easy in his mind." The man flashed a look at her that made the girl burn with shame.

"We could go round an' miss the 'Paches," suggested Ramona timidly.

"Forget that notion," answered Gurley, and there was a flash of cruelty in his eyes. "Mebbe you misremember that I 'm obligated to you, miss, for what that condemned Ranger Roberts did to me when I fell over the box in front of the store. We'll settle accounts whilst you're here, I reckon."

The girl appealed to Dinsmore. "You're not going to let him . . . mistreat me, are you?"

The pathos of her situation, the slim, helpless, wonderful youth of the girl, touched the not very accessible heart of Dinsmore.

"You bet I'm not. He'll cut out that kind o' talk right now," he said.

The eyes of Ramona met his, and she knew she was safe. This man had the respect for a good woman that was characteristic of the turbulent

West in its most lawless days. He might be a miscreant and a murderer, but he would fight at the drop of a hat in response to the appeal of any woman who was "straight."

"Playin' up to Clint, are you, Homer?" sneered the other man. "You better take her straight home like she wants, since you're so friendly to the family."

"That's exactly what I'm goin' to do," retorted Dinsmore. "Any objections?"

Gurley dropped his sneer instantly. His alarm voiced itself in a wheedling apology. "I did n't go for to rile you, Homer. O' course you cayn't do that. We got to stick together. The Indians is one reason. An' there's another. No need for me to tell you what it is."

"You'll have to wait for me in the cañon till I get back. It's not far from here to you-know-where. I'm goin' to take the horses an' see this girl back to her home."

"You're good," Ramona said simply.

"You're not figurin' on takin' my horse, are you?" Gurley burst out with an oath.

"You've done guessed it, Steve. You'll have to hoof it into the cañon."

"Like hell I will. Take another think, my friend."

The eyes of the men clashed, one pair filled with impotent rage, the other cold and hard as polished steel on a frosty morning.

Gurley yielded sullenly. "It's no square deal, Homer. We did n't bring her here. Why cayn't she go along with us an' hole up till the 'Paches are gone an' till . . . things kinda settle down?"

"Because she's got no business with folks like us. Her place is back at the A T O, an' that's where I aim to take her. She's had one hell of a time, if you ask me. What that kid needs is for her home folks to tuck her up in bed an' send her to sleep. She's had about all the trouble a li'l' trick like her can stand, I should n't wonder."

"You ain't her nurse," growled Gurley.

"That's why I'm goin' to take her home to those that are. 'Nuff said, Steve. What I say goes."

"You act mighty high-heeled," grumbled the other man.

"Mebbeso," replied Dinsmore curtly. "Saddle the horses, Steve."

"I dunno as I'm yore horse-rustler," mumbled Gurley, smothering his sullen rage. None the less he rose slowly and shuffled away toward the hobbled horses.

'Mona touched Dinsmore on the sleeve. Her soft eyes poured gratitude on him. "I'll remember this as long as I live. No matter what anybody says I'll always know that you're good."

The blood crept up beneath the tan of the outlaw's face. It had been many years since an innocent child had made so naïve a confession of

faith in him. He was a bad-man, and he knew it. But at the core of him was a dynamic spark of self-respect that had always remained alight. He had ridden crooked trails through all his gusty lifetime. His hand had been against every man's, but at least he had fought fair and been loyal to his pals. And there had never been a time when a good woman need be afraid to look him in the face.

"Sho! Nothin' to that. I gotta take you home so as you won't be in the way," he told her with a touch of embarrassed annoyance.

No man alive knew this country better than Homer Dinsmore. Every draw was like its neighbor, every rolling rise a replica of the next. But the outlaw rode as straight a course as if his road had been marked out for him by stakes across the plains. He knew that he might be riding directly toward a posse of Rangers headed for Palo Duro to round up the stage robbers. He could not help that. He would have to take his chance of an escape in case they met such a posse.

The sun climbed high in the heavens.

"How far do you think we are now from the ranch?" asked Ramona.

"'Most twenty miles. We've been swingin' well to the left. I reckon we can cut in now."

They climbed at a walk a little hill and looked across a wide sweep of country before them. Ramona gave a startled cry and pointed an out-

stretched finger at some riders emerging from a dry wash.

"'Paches!" cried Dinsmore. "Back over the hill, girl."

They turned, but too late. On the breeze there came to them a yell that sent the blood from 'Mona's heart.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ON A HOT TRAIL

ROBERTS picked up from the fort a Mescalero Apache famous as a trailer. He reckoned to be rather expert in that line himself, but few white men could boast of such skill as old Guadaloupe had.

Jumbo Wilkins was one of the posse Jack had hastily gathered. "I'm good an' glad I was in town an' not out herdin' *vacas*, Tex. A fellow kinda needs a little excitement oncet in a while. I got a hunch we're goin' to git these birds this time."

"You're the greatest little optimist I ever did see, Jumbo," answered the Ranger with a smile. "We're goin' to strike a cold trail of men who know every inch of this country an' are ridin' hell-for-leather to make a get-away. We're liable to ride our broncs to shadows an' never see hair or hide of the fellows we want. I'd like to know what license you've got for yore hunch."

"You're such a lucky guy, Tex. If you was lookin' for a needle in a haystack you'd find it in yore mouth when you picked up a straw to chew on."

"Lucky, nothin'. A man makes his own luck, I always did tell you, an' I have n't bumped into

any yet. You don't see any big bunch of fat cows with my brand on 'em, do you? I'm pluggin' along for a dollar a day with a promise from Cap Ellison that I'll probably cash in soon with my boots on. Old Man Luck always hides behind the door when I pass, if there's any such Santa Claus in the business."

"All the way you look at it. Didn't Clint Wadley offer you the job of bossin' the best cow-ranch in the Panhandle?"

"An' didn't I have to turn down his offer an' hang on to a dollar-a-day job?"

"Then you saved Miss 'Mona from that bull an' made a friend of her."

"Yes, an' then I butted in an' kept the Kiowas from mussin' up Art Ridley, who is liable to ask me to stand up with him when he marries Miss Ramona," added the Ranger.

"Shucks! She'll never marry Ridley so long as you're runnin' around unbranded, son."

"A lot you know about girls, Jumbo," said Roberts with a rueful grin. "I don't know sic' 'em about the things they like. I'm one chaparral-raised roughneck. That little lady never wasted two thoughts on me. But Art — he knows a lot about books an' style an' New York's four hundred. He's good to look at, clean, knows how to talk, an' makes a sure-enough hit with the girls."

"He's a sissy boy beside you. No Texas girl would look twice —"

"Nothin' a-tall to that. Did n't he save Clint Wadley's life? Did n't he stay by Dinsmore when the Kiowas had 'em holed? He fought good enough to get shot up this mo'nin', did n't he? No, sir. You 'll find he 's got me backed off the map so far as Miss Ramona goes. I know it, old-timer."

"Where do you get that notion you 're a roughneck, Tex?" asked Jumbo. "You 've read more books than any man on the range. You don't hell around like most of the boys. You don't drink. Mebbe you ain't exactly pretty, but yore face does n't scare critters when they see it onexpected. An' when the band begins to play — Gentlemen, watch Tex."

"If the girls would only let you do the pickin' for 'em, Jumbo," suggested Roberts with his sardonic smile.

Through rabbit weed and curly mesquite, among the catclaw and the prickly pear, they followed the faint ribbon trail left by the outlaws in their retreat from the scene of the hold-up.

When it was too late to cut sign any longer, the Ranger gave orders to throw in to a small draw where the grass was good. At daybreak they were on the trail again and came within the hour to the body of Overstreet. They dug a grave in a buffalo run with their knives and buried the body as well as they could before they picked up again the tracks of two horses now traveling much faster.

"They're headin' for Palo Duro, looks like," commented Roberts.

"Looks like," agreed his friend.

Early in the afternoon the posse reached the little creek where the outlaws had breakfasted. Old Guadaloupe criss-crossed the ground like a bloodhound as he read what was written there. But before he made any report Roberts himself knew that a third person had joined the fugitives and that this recruit was a woman. The Ranger followed the Apache upstream, guessed by some feathers and some drops of blood that one of the outlaws had shot a prairie-hen, and read some hint of the story of the meeting between the woman and the bandit.

Was this woman some one who had been living in Palo Duro Cañon with the outlaws? Or was this meeting an accidental one? The odd thing about it was that there was no sign of her horse. She had come on foot, in a country where nobody ever travels that way.

Roberts told Guadaloupe to find out where the party had gone from the camp. He himself followed into the desert the footsteps of the woman who had come across it toward the creek. He was puzzled and a little disturbed in mind. She had not come from the cañon. What was a woman doing alone and on foot in this desert empty of human life for fifty miles or more?

He found no answer to his questions and re-

luctantly returned to the camp-fire. Guadaloupe was ready with his report. One man had started out on foot along the edge of the cañon. The other man and the woman had struck on horseback across the plain.

"We'll follow those on horseback," decided the Ranger at once. He could not have told why the urgent impulse was on him to do this, nor why he did not split his party and send part of his men in pursuit of the foot traveler. Later he laid it to what Jumbo would have called a hunch.

He was puzzled by the direction the two riders were taking. It led neither to the A T O nor to Tascosa, and was making no account of the streams where the travelers would have to find water. They seemed to be plunging ignorantly into the desert, but since Gurley or Dinsmore was one of the two this could not be. Either of these men could have traveled the Panhandle blindfolded.

They followed the tracks for hours. The line of travel was so direct that it told of purpose. Dinsmore — if the man were Dinsmore — evidently knew just what he was doing. Then, abruptly, the tracks pointed to the right, straight for the A T O.

But not for long. At the summit of a little rise the riders had plainly stopped for a few moments, then had turned and galloped fast for the southwest. The lengthening tracks, the sharpness of

them, the carelessness with which the riders took the rougher ground to follow a straight line, all suggested an urgent and imperative reason.

That reason became plain to Roberts in another minute. A great number of tracks swept in from the left and blotted out those of the two flying riders.

"Chiricahua Apaches," grunted Guadaloupe. The scout had a feud with that branch of the tribe and was at war with them.

"How many?" questioned Jack.

The Indian held up the fingers of both hands, closed them, opened them, and a third time shut and lifted the fingers.

"Thirty?" asked the Ranger.

The Apache nodded.

"Dinsmore 's makin' for Palo Duro," remarked Wilkins as they followed at a canter the plain trail marked for them. "I'll bet he don't throw down on himself none on that race either. He's sure hell-bent on gettin' there."

One of the riders called to the Rangers. "Look over to the left, Tex. We got company."

A little group of riders — three, four, five of them — emerged from behind a clump of Spanish bayonet and signaled with a bandana handkerchief. As they rode closer the heart of the Ranger died under his ribs. His stomach muscles tightened, and he felt a prickling of the skin run down his back. For Clint Wadley rode at the head of

these men, and like a flash of lightning the truth had seared across the brain of Jack Roberts. His daughter was the woman riding to escape from the savages.

The face of Wadley confirmed the guess of the Ranger. On the unshaven face of the cattleman dust was caked. His eyes were red and inflamed from the alkali and the tears he had fought back fifty times. The expression of the man was that of one passing through the torments of hell.

In five broken sentences he told his story. Quint Sullivan, escaping from his pursuers after a thirty-mile run, had reached the ranch in the middle of the night. Clint had gathered together such men as were at hand and started at once. At Crane Lake he had found no trace of her. He could not escape the conviction that the Apaches had captured Ramona and taken her with them.

On this last point the Ranger offered him comfort, though it was sorry comfort at that. Five hours ago she was still safe, but in terrible danger.

"Dinsmore 's a man — none gamer in Texas, Mr. Wadley. He won't desert her," said Jumbo. "You could n't 'a' picked a better man to look out for her."

"How do you know it 's Dinsmore? Perhaps it 's that yellow wolf Gurley," answered the father out of his tortured heart.

Jack was riding on the other side of Wadley. He, too, carried with him a private hell of fear

in his heart, but he knew that the big cattleman was nearly insane with anxiety.

"Because the man with Miss Ramona was takin' her back to the ranch when they bumped into the 'Paches. You know Steve Gurley would never have taken her home in the world," replied the Ranger.

"What can one man do against thirty? He'll do what Quint here did — run to save his own hide."

Young Sullivan winced. It was the truth. He had run and left the girl to the mercy of these devils. But his one chance of helping her had been to run. He tried to say as much.

"I know that, Quint. I'm not blamin' you," broke out the father in his agony. "But my little lamb — in the hands of 'Paches — God!" Wadley covered his eyes with his hand and tried to press back from his brain the horrible visions he kept seeing.

Jumbo stuck to his one valid point. "Bite yore teeth into this, Clint. She's got ridin' beside her as game a man as ever threw his leg over leather. He knows this country like you do yore ranch. He'll hole up in Palo Duro where the 'Paches won't find 'em, an' if the devils do he'll sure stand 'em off till we blow in."

His friend on the other side of the cattleman backed him up strongly, but the heart of the Ranger was heavy with dread.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

DINSMORE TO THE RESCUE

If 'Mona lives to be eighty the high-lights of that wild ride will never fade from her memory. The mesas rolled in long swells as far as the eye could see. Through the chaparral the galloping horses plunged while the prickly pear and the cholla clutched at their flanks and at the legs of the riders. Into water-gutted arroyos they descended, slid down breakneck shale ridges, climbed like heather cats the banks of dry washes, pounded over white porous *malpais* on which no vegetation grew.

Now Dinsmore was in front of her picking out the best way, now he was beside her with cool, easy words of confidence, now he rode between her and the naked Apaches, firing with deliberate and deadly accuracy.

"Don't look back," he warned her more than once. "My job is to look out for them. Yours is to see yore horse don't throw you or break a leg in a prairie-dog hole. They cayn't outrun us. Don't worry about that."

The man was so easy in manner, apparently so equal to the occasion, that as the miles slid behind them her panic vanished. She felt for the small revolver in her belt to make sure it was safe.

If she should be thrown, or if her horse should be shot, one thing must be done instantly. She must send a bullet crashing into her brain.

To the right and to the left of her jets of dirt spat up where the shots of the Indians struck the ground. Once or twice she looked back, but the sight of the bareback riders at their heels so unnerved her that she obeyed the orders of her companion and resisted the dreadful fascination of turning in her saddle.

It had seemed to 'Mona at first with each backward glance that the Indians were gaining fast on them, but after a time she knew this was not true. The sound of their shots became fainter. She no longer saw the spitting of the dust from their bullets and guessed they must be falling short.

Her eyes flashed a question at the man riding beside her. "We're gaining?"

"That's whatever. We'll make the cañon all right an' keep goin'. Don't you be scared," he told her cheerfully.

Even as he spoke, Ramona went plunging over the head of her horse into a bunch of shin-oak. Up in an instant, she ran to remount. The bronco tried to rise from where it lay, but fell back helplessly to its side. One of its fore legs had been broken in a prairie-dog hole.

Dinsmore swung round his horse and galloped back, disengaging one foot from the stir-

rup. The girl caught the hand he held down to her and leaped up beside the saddle, the arch of her foot resting lightly on the toe of his boot. Almost with the same motion she swung astride the cow-pony. It jumped to a gallop and Ramona clung to the waist of the man in front of her. She could hear plainly now the yells of the exultant savages.

The outlaw knew that it would be nip and tuck to reach Palo Duro, close though it was. He abandoned at once his hopes of racing up the cañon until the Apaches dropped the pursuit. It was now solely a question of speed. He must get into the gulch, even though he had to kill his bronco to do it. After that he must trust to luck and hold the redskins off as long as he could. There was always a chance that Ellison's Rangers might be close. Homer Dinsmore knew how slender a thread it was upon which to hang a hope, but it was the only one they had.

His quirt rose and fell once, though he recognized that his horse was doing its best. But the lash fell in the air and did not burn the flank of the animal. He patted its neck. He murmured encouragement in its ear.

"Good old Black Jack, I knew you would n't throw down on me. Keep a-humpin', old-timer. . . . You're doin' fine. . . . Here we are at Palo Duro. . . . Another half-mile, pal."

Dinsmore turned to the left after they had

dropped down a shale slide into the cañon. The trail wound through a thick growth of young foliage close to the bed of the stream.

The man slipped down from the back of the laboring horse and followed it up the trail. Once he caught a glimpse of the savages coming down the shale slide and took a shot through the brush.

"Got one of their horses," he told 'Mona. "That'll keep 'em for a while and give us a few minutes. They'll figure I'll try to hold 'em here."

'Mona let the horse pick its way up the rapidly ascending trail. Presently the cañon opened a little. Its walls fell back from a small, grassy valley containing two or three acres. The trail led up a ledge of rock jutting out from one of the sheer faces of cliff. Presently it dipped down behind some great boulders that had fallen from above some time in the ages that this great cleft had been in the making.

A voice hailed them. "That you, Homer?"

"Yep. The 'Paches are right on our heels, Steve."

Gurley let out a wailing oath. "Goddlemighty, man, why did you come here?"

"Driven in. They chased us ten miles. Better 'light, ma'am. We're liable to stay here quite a spell." Dinsmore unsaddled the horse and tied it to a shrub. "You're sure all in, Black Jack. Mebbe you'll never be the same bronc again. I've got this to say, old pal. I never straddled a better

hawss than you. That goes without copperin'." He patted its sweat-stained neck, fondled its nose for a moment, then turned briskly to the business in hand. "Get behind that p'int o' rocks, Steve. I'll cover the trail up. Girl, you'll find a kind of cave under that flat boulder. You get in there an' hunt cover."

'Mona did as she was told. Inside the cave were blankets, a saddle, the remains of an old campfire, and a piece of jerked venison hanging from a peg driven between two rocks. There were, too, a rifle leaning against the big boulder and a canvas bag containing ammunition.

The rifle was a '73. She busied herself loading it. Just as she finished there came to her the crack of Dinsmore's repeater.

The outlaw gave a little whoop of exultation.

"Tally one."

CHAPTER XXXIX

A CRY OUT OF THE NIGHT

NIGHT fell before the rescue party reached Palo Duro. The cañon was at that time a *terra incognita* to these cattlemen of the Panhandle. To attempt to explore it in the darkness would be to court disaster. The Apaches might trap the whole party.

But neither the Ranger nor Wadley could endure the thought of waiting till morning to push forward. The anxiety that weighed on them both could find relief only in action.

Jack made a proposal to Ramona's father. "We've got to throw off and camp here. No two ways about that. But I'm goin' to ride forward to Palo Duro an' see what I can find out. Want to go along?"

"Boy, I had in mind that very thing. We'll leave Jumbo in charge of the camp with orders to get started soon as he can see in the mo'nin'."

The two men rode into the darkness. They knew the general direction of Palo Duro and were both plainsmen enough to follow a straight course even in the blackest night. They traveled at a fast road gait, letting the horses pick their own way through the mesquite. Presently a star came out — and another. Banked clouds scudded across the sky in squadrons.

At last, below their feet, lay the great earth rift that made Palo Duro. It stretched before them an impenetrable black gulf of silence.

"No use trying to go down at random," said Jack, peering into its bottomless deeps. "Even if we did n't break our necks we 'd get lost down there. My notion is for me to follow the bank in one direction an' for you to take the other. We might hear something."

"Sounds reasonable," agreed Wadley.

The cattleman turned to the left, the Ranger to the right. Roberts rode at a slow trot, stopping every few minutes to listen for any noise that might rise from the gulch.

His mind was full of pictures of the girl, one following another inconsequently. They stabbed him poignantly. He had a white dream of her moving down the street at Tascosa with step elastic, the sun sparkling in her soft, wavy hair. Another memory jumped to the fore of her on the stage, avoiding with shy distress the advances of the salesman he had jolted into his place. He saw her grave and gay, sweet and candid and sincere, but always just emerging with innocent radiance from the chrysalis of childhood.

Her presence was so near, she was so intimately close, that more than once he pulled up under an impression that she was calling him.

It was while he was waiting so, his weight resting easily in the saddle, that out of the night there

came to him a faint, far-away cry of dreadful agony. The sound of it shook Jack to the soul. Cold beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. Gooseflesh ran down his spine. His hand trembled. The heart inside his ribs was a heavy weight of ice. Though he had never heard it before, the Ranger knew that awful cry for the scream of a man in torment. The Apaches were torturing a captured prisoner.

If Dinsmore had been captured by them the chances were that 'Mona had been taken, too, unless he had given her the horse and remained to hold the savages back.

Roberts galloped wildly along the edge of the rift. Once again he heard that long-drawn wail of anguish and pulled up his horse to listen, the while he shook like a man with a heavy chill.

Before the sound of it had died away a shot echoed up the cañon to him. His heart seemed to give an answering lift of relief. Some one was still holding the Apaches at bay. He fired at once as a message that help was on the way.

His trained ear told him that the rifle had been fired scarcely a hundred yards below him, apparently from some ledge of the cliff well up from the bottom of the gulch. It might have come from the defenders or it might have been a shot fired by an Apache. Jack determined to find out.

He unfastened the *tientos* of his saddle which held the lariat. A scrub oak jutted up from the

edge of the cliff and to this he tied securely one end of the rope. Rifle in hand, he worked over the edge and lowered himself foot by foot. The rope spun round like a thing alive, bumped him against the rock wall, twisted in the other direction, and rubbed his face against the harsh stone. He had no assurance that the lariat would reach to the foot of the cliff, and as he went jerkily down, hand under hand, he knew that at any moment he might come to the end of it and be dashed against the boulders below.

His foot touched loose rubble, and he could see that the face of the precipice was rooted here in a slope that led down steeply to another wall. The ledge was like a roof pitched at an extremely acute angle. He had to get down on hands and knees to keep from sliding to the edge of the second precipice. At every movement he started small avalanches of stone and dirt. He crept forward with the utmost caution, dragging the rifle by his side.

A shot rang out scarcely fifty yards from him, fired from the same ledge upon which he was crawling.

Had that shot been fired by an Apache or by those whom he had come to aid?

CHAPTER XL

GURLEY'S GET-AWAY

THE boulder cave to which the Apaches had driven Dinsmore and Ramona had long since been picked out by the outlaws as a defensible position in case of need. The ledge that ran up to it on the right offered no cover for attackers. It was scarcely three feet wide, and above and below it the wall was for practical purposes perpendicular. In anticipation of a day when his gang might be rounded up by a posse, Pete Dinsmore had gone over the path and flung down into the gulch every bit of quartz big enough to shelter a man.

The contour of the rock face back of the big boulders was concave, so that the defenders were protected from sharpshooters at the edge of the precipice above.

Another way led up from the bed of the creek by means of a very rough and broken climb terminating in the loose rubble about the point where the ledge ran out. This Dinsmore had set Gurley to watch, but it was not likely that the Indians would reach here for several hours a point dangerous to the attacked.

Of what happened that day Ramona saw little. She loaded rifles and pushed them out to Dinsmore from the safety of the cave. Once he had

shouted out to her or to Gurley news of a second successful shot.

"One more good Indian. Hi-yi-yi!" The last was a taunt to the Apaches hidden below.

There came a time late in the afternoon when the serious attack of the redskins developed. It came from the left, and it was soon plain that a number of Apaches had found cover in the rough boulder bed halfway up from the creek. Ramona took Dinsmore's place as guard over the pathway while he moved across to help Gurley rout the sharpshooters slowly edging forward.

One hour of sharp work did it. Man for man there never was any comparison between the Indians and the early settlers as fighting men. Dinsmore and Gurley, both good shots, better armed and better trained than the Apaches, drove the bucks back from the boulder bed where they were deployed. One certainly was killed, another probably. As quickly as they could with safety disengage themselves the braves drew down into the shelter of the brush below.

But Dinsmore knew that the temporary victory achieved could not affect the end of this one-sided battle. The Apaches would wipe all three of them out — unless by some miracle help reached them from outside. Ramona, too, knew it. So did Gurley.

As the darkness fell the fingers of 'Mona crept often to the little revolver by her side. Sometime

soon — perhaps in three hours, perhaps in twelve, perhaps in twenty-four — she must send a bullet into her brain. She decided quite calmly that she would do it at the last possible moment that would admit of certainty. She must not make any mistake, must not wait till it was too late. It would be a horrible thing to do, but — she must not fall alive into the hands of the Apaches.

Crouched behind his boulder in the darkness, Gurley too knew that the party was facing extinction. He could not save the others by staying. Was it possible to save himself by going? He knew that rough climb down through the boulder beds to the cañon below. The night was black as Egypt. Surely it would be possible, if he kept well to the left, to dodge any sentries the Indians might have set.

He moistened his dry lips with his tongue. Furtively he glanced back toward the cave where the girl was hidden. She could not see him. Nor could Dinsmore. They would know nothing about it till long after he had gone. Their stupidity had brought the Apaches upon them. If they had taken his advice the savages would have missed them by ten miles. Why should he let their folly destroy him too? If he escaped he might meet some freight outfit and send help to them.

The man edged out from his rock, crept noiselessly into the night. He crawled along the steep

rubble slide, wary and soft-footed as a panther. It took him a long half-hour to reach the boulder bed. Rifle in hand, he lowered himself from rock to rock, taking advantage of every shadow. . . .

An hour later Dinsmore called to 'Mona. "Asleep, girl?"

"No," she answered in a small voice.

"Slip out with these cartridges to Steve and find out if anythin's doin'. Then you'd better try to sleep. 'Paches don't attack at night."

Ramona crept along the ledge back of the big boulders. Gurley had gone — vanished completely. Her heart stood still. There was some vague thought in her mind that the Indians had somehow disposed of him. She called to Dinsmore in a little stifled shout that brought him on the run.

"He's gone!" she gasped.

The eyes of Dinsmore blazed. He knew exactly how to account for the absence of the man. "I might 'a' known it. The yellow coyote! Left us in the lurch to save his own hide!"

"Perhaps he's gone for help," the girl suggested faintly.

"No chance. He's playin' a lone hand — tryin' for a get-away himself," her companion said bitterly. "You'll have to take his place here. If you see anything move, no matter what it is, shoot at it."

"If I call you will you come?" she begged.

"On the jump," he promised. "Don't go to sleep. If they should come it will be up through the boulder bed. I'm leavin' you here because you can watch from cover where you can't possibly be seen. It 's different on the other side."

She knew that, but as soon as he had left her the heart of the girl sank. She was alone, lost in a night of howling savages. The horrible things they did to their captives — she recalled a story whispered to her by a girl friend that it had been impossible to shake out of her mind. In the middle of the night she had more than once found herself sitting bolt upright in bed, wakened from terrible dreams of herself as a prisoner of the Apaches.

'Mona prayed, and found some comfort in her prayers. They were the frank, selfish petitions of a little child.

"God, don't let me die. I'm so young, and so frightened. Send Daddy to save me . . . or Jack Roberts."

She recited the twenty-third Psalm aloud in a low voice. The fourth verse she went back to, repeating it several times.

"'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.'"

And the last verse:

"'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'"

Somehow she felt less lonely afterward. God was on her side. He would send her father or Jack Roberts.

Then, into her newborn calm, there came a far cry of agony that shattered it instantly. Her taut nerves gave way like a broken bow-string. Her light body began to shake. She leaned against the cold rock wall in hysterical collapse.

The voice of Dinsmore boomed along the passageway. "It's a cougar, girl. They've got a yell like the scream of lost souls. I've often heard it here."

Ramona knew he was lying, but the sound of his cheerful voice was something. She was not utterly alone.

Again that shriek lifted into the night and echoed up the cañon. The girl covered her ears with her hands and trembled violently. A shot rang out from the other end of the passage.

"Saw one of 'em movin' down below," the outlaw called to her.

But Ramona did not hear him. She had fainted.

CHAPTER XLI

HOMING HEARTS

Jack crept closer, very carefully. He was morally certain that the defenders held the ledge, but it would not do to make a mistake. Lives were at stake — one life much more precious than his own.

He drew his revolver and snaked forward. There was nothing else to do but take a chance. But he meant at least to minimize it, and certainly not to let himself be captured alive.

It was strange that nobody yet had challenged him. He was close enough now to peer into the darkness of the tunnel between the boulders and the wall. There seemed to be no one on guard.

He crept forward to the last boulder, and his boot pressed against something soft lying on the ground. It moved. A white, startled face was lifted to his — a face that held only the darkness of despair.

He knelt, put down his revolver, and slipped an arm around the warm young body.

"Thank God!" he cried softly. He was trembling in every limb. Tears filled his voice. And over and over again he murmured, "Thank God! . . . Thank God!"

The despair in the white face slowly dissolved.

He read there doubt, a growing certainty, and then a swift, soft radiance of joy and tears.

"I prayed for you, and you've come. God sent you to me. Oh, Jack, at last!"

Her arms crept round his neck. He held her close and kissed the sweet lips salt with tears of happiness.

He was ashamed of himself. Not since he had been a little boy had he cried till now. His life had made for stoicism. But tears furrowed down his lean, brown cheeks. The streak in him that was still tender-hearted child had suddenly come to the surface. For he had expected to find her dead at best; instead, her warm, soft body was in his arms, her eyes were telling him an unbelievable story that her tongue as yet could find no words to utter. There flamed in him, like fire in dead tumbleweeds, a surge of glad triumph that inexplicably blended with humble thankfulness.

To her his emotion was joy without complex. The Ranger was tough as a hickory withe. She knew him hard as tempered steel to those whom he opposed, and her heart throbbed with excitement at his tears. She alone among all women could have touched him so. It came to her like a revelation that she need never have feared. He was her destined mate. Across that wide desert space empty of life he had come straight to her as to a magnet.

And from that moment, all through the night,

she never once thought of being afraid. Her man was beside her. He would let no harm come to her. Womanlike, she exulted in him. He was so lithe and brown and slender, so strong and clean, and in all the world there was nothing that he feared.

With her hand in his she walked through the passage to where Dinsmore held watch. The outlaw turned and looked at the Ranger. If anybody had told him that a time would come when he would be glad to see Tex Roberts for any purpose except to fight him, the bandit would have had a swift, curt answer ready. But at sight of him his heart leaped. No hint of this showed in his leathery face.

"Earnin' that dollar a day, are you?" he jeered.

"A dollar a day an' grub," corrected Jack, smiling.

"Much of a posse with you?"

"Dropped in alone. My men are camped a few miles back. Mr. Wadley is with us."

"They got Gurley, I reckon. He tried to sneak away." Dinsmore flashed a quick look toward Ramona and back at Jack. "Leastways I'm not bettin' on his chances. Likely one of the 'Paches shot him."

"Mebbeso."

The girl said nothing. She knew that neither of the men believed Gurley had been shot. Those horrible cries that had come out of the night had

been wrung from him by past-masters in the business of torture.

"You 'd better get back an' hold the other end of the passage," suggested Dinsmore. He jerked his head toward 'Mona. "She 'll show you where."

Ramona sat beside her lover while he kept watch, her head against his shoulder, his arm around her waist. Beneath the stars that were beginning to prick through the sky they made their confessions of love to each other. She told him how she had tried to hate him because of her brother and could not, and he in turn told her how he had thought Arthur Ridley was her choice.

"I did think so once — before I knew you," she admitted, soft eyes veiled beneath long lashes. "Then that day you fought with the bull to save me: I began to love you then."

They talked most of the night away, but in the hours toward morning he made her lie down and rest. She protested that she could n't sleep; she would far rather sit beside him. But almost as soon as her head touched the saddle she was asleep.

A little before dawn he went to waken her. For a moment the soft loveliness of curved cheek and flowing lines touched him profoundly. The spell of her innocence moved him to reverence. She was still a child, and she was giving her life into his keeping.

The flush of sleep was still on her wrinkled cheek when she sat up at his touch.

"The Apaches are climbing up the boulder field," he explained. "I did n't want to waken you with a shot."

She stood before him in shy, sweet surrender, waiting for him to kiss her before he took his post. He did.

"It 's goin' to be all right," he promised her. "We 'll drive 'em back an' soon yore father will be here with the men."

"I'm not afraid," she said — "not the least littlest bit. But you're not to expose yourself."

"They can't hit a barn door — never can. But I'll take no chances," he promised.

During the night the Apaches had stolen far up the boulder bed and found cover behind quartz slabs which yielded them protection as good as that of the white man above. They took no chances, since there was plenty of time to get the imprisoned party without rushing the fort. Nobody knew they were here. Therefore nobody would come to their rescue. It was possible that they had food with them, but they could not have much water. In good time — it might be one sleep, perhaps two, possibly three — those on the ledge must surrender or die. So the Indians reasoned, and so the Ranger guessed that they would reason.

Jack lay behind his rocks as patiently as the

savages did. Every ten or fifteen minutes he fired a shot, not so much with the expectation of hitting one of the enemy as to notify his friends where he was. Above the cañon wall opposite the sun crept up and poured a golden light into the misty shadows of the gulch. Its shaft stole farther down the hillside till it touched the yellowing foliage of the cottonwoods.

Up the cañon came the sudden pop — pop — pop of exploding rifles. Drifted up yells and whoops. The Indians hidden in the rock slide began to appear, dodging swiftly down toward the trees. Jack let out the "Hi-yi-yi" of the line-rider and stepped out from the boulders to get a better shot. The naked Apaches, leaping like jack-rabbits, scurried for cover. Their retreat was cut off from the right, and they raced up the gorge to escape the galloping cowboys who swung round the bend. One of the red men, struck just as he was sliding from a flat rock, whirled, plunged down headfirst like a diver, and disappeared in the brush.

Jack waited to see no more. He turned and walked back into the cave where his incomparable sweetheart was standing with her little fingers clasped tightly together.

"It's all over. The 'Paches are on the run," he told her.

She drew a deep, long breath and trembled into his arms.

There Clint Wadley found her five minutes later. The cattleman brushed the young fellow aside and surrounded his little girl with rough tenderness. Jack waited to see no more, but joined Dinsmore outside.

After a long time Wadley, his arm still around Ramona, joined them on the ledge.

"Boys, I'm no hand at talkin'," he said huskily. "I owe both of you a damned sight more than I can ever pay. I'll talk with you later, Jack. What about you, Dinsmore? You're in one hell of a fix. I'll get you out of it or go broke."

"What fix am I in?" demanded the outlaw boldly. "They ain't got a thing on me — not a thing. Suspicions are n't proof."

The Ranger said nothing. He knew that the evidence he could give would hang Dinsmore before any Panhandle jury, and now his heart was wholly on the side of the ruffian who had saved the life of his sweetheart. None the less, it was his duty to take the man in charge and he meant to do it.

"Hope you can make yore side of the case stick, Dinsmore. I sure hope so. Anyway, from now on I'm with you at every turn of the road," the cattleman promised.

"Much obliged," answered the outlaw with a lift of his lip that might have been either a smile or a sneer.

"You've been trailin' with a bad outfit. You're

a sure-enough wolf, I've heard tell. But you're a man all the way, by gad."

"Did you figure I was yellow like Steve, Clint? Mebbe I'm a bad *hombre* all right. But you've known me twenty years. What license have you ever had to think I'd leave a kid like her for the 'Paches to play with?" The hard eyes of the outlaw challenged a refutation of his claim.

"None in the world, Homer. You're game. Nobody ever denied you guts. An' you're a better man than I thought you were."

Dinsmore splattered the face of a rock with tobacco juice and his stained teeth showed in a sardonic grin.

"I've got a white black heart," he jeered.

CHAPTER XLII

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

RESCUED and rescuers rode out of the cañon as soon as the Apaches had been driven away. Nobody suggested that the Indians who had been killed in the surprise attack be buried. The bodies were left lying where they had fallen. For in those days no frontiersman ever buried a dead redskin. If the body happened to be inconveniently near a house, a mounted cowboy roped one foot and dragged it to a distance. Those were the years when all settlers agreed that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. The Indian wars are over now, and a new generation can safely hold a more humane view; but old-timers in the Panhandle will tell you to-day that the saying was literally true.

The little group of riders drew out of the gorge and climbed the shale slide to the plain above. Roberts rode knee to knee with Dinsmore. On the other side of the outlaw was Jumbo. The man between them still carried his rifle and his revolver, but he understood without being told that he was a prisoner.

Wadley dropped back from his place beside Ramona and ranged up beside the officer.

"What are you aimin' to do with him, Jack?" he asked in a low voice.

"I'm goin' to turn him over to Cap Ellison."

The cattleman pondered that awhile before he continued. "'Mona has been tellin' me about you an' her, Jack. I ain't got a word to say — not a word. If you're the man she wants, you're sure the man she'll get. But I want to tell you that you're a lucky young scamp. You don't deserve her. I've got to see the man yet that does."

"We're not goin' to quarrel about that, Mr. Wadley," agreed Jack. "I'm nothin' but a rough cowboy, an' she's the salt of the earth. I don't see what she sees in me."

"H'm!" grunted the owner of the A T O, and looked at the lithe, brown, young fellow, supple as a whip and strong as tested steel. It was not hard to understand what a girl saw in him. "Glad you got sense enough to know that."

"I'm not a plumb fool, you know."

Clint changed the subject apparently. "Boy, I've been in hell ever since Sullivan rode in with the bad news. My God! how I suffered till I saw my little trick standing there alive and well."

The Ranger nodded. He thought he knew what Wadley was driving toward. But he was resolved to give him no help. He must make his own plea.

"You helped save her, Jack. That's all right. I reckon you care for her too. Any man would 'a' done what you did. But Dinsmore, he did a whole lot more 'n you. When he was hot

footing it to escape from you, he turned round an' started to bring her back to the ranch. Steve Gurley, he said to take 'Mona along with 'em to the cañon. You know what that hellhound meant. But Dinsmore would n't stand for that. He said she was entitled to be took home. Well, you know how the 'Paches cut 'em off."

"Yes. That's how we figured it out," said Roberts.

"Her hawss stepped into a prairie-dog hole an' broke its leg. Dinsmore stopped an' swung her up behind him, the 'Paches gainin' every jump of the road. Oncet they reached Palo Duro he stood off the devils till she reached the ledge. Jack, we're lucky that a man like Homer Dinsmore was beside her yesterday, don't you reckon?"

"I reckon." Tiny beads of sweat stood on the forehead of the boy. He knew now what was coming.

"Good enough. Well, Jack, I reckon we cayn't take Dinsmore in to be hanged. That would n't be human, would it?"

The roof of the Ranger's mouth was dry. He looked away across the rolling waves of prairie while the cattleman waited for his answer. Every impulse of desire in him leaned toward the argument Wadley was making. His love for Ramona, his gratitude to Dinsmore, his keen desire to meet halfway the man who was to be his

father-in-law and had accepted the prospect so generously, his boyish admiration for the thing that the outlaw had done, all tugged mightily at him.

"An' look a-here," went on the cattleman, "you got to keep in mind that you never would 'a' got Dinsmore this trip in kingdom come if he had n't stopped to save 'Mona. He'd 'a' kep' right up the cañon till he was sure enough lost. It would be a damned mean trick for you to take a man in to be hanged because he had risked his life to save the girl you claim to love."

"You make me feel like a yellow hound, Mr. Wadley," admitted Roberts. "But what am I to do? When I joined the Rangers I swore to enforce the law. You know how it is in the force. We've got no friends when we're sent out to get a man. I'd bring in my own brother if he was wanted. That's why the Texas Rangers stack up so high. They play no favorites an' they let no prisoners escape. You're askin' me to throw down Cap Ellison who trusts me, the State that pays me, the boys on the force that pal with me, an' my loyalty to the people. You want me to do it because I've got a personal reason to wish Dinsmore to get away. If I don't take him in to town I'm a traitor. That 's the long an' the short of it."

"Hell's blazes!" broke in the cattleman. "I thought you was a man an' not a machine. You

want to marry my li'l' girl, but you're not willin' to do a favor to the man who has just saved her from a hundred horrible deaths. Have n't you any guts in you a-tall?"

The muscles stood out on the lean, set face of the Ranger like rawhide ropes. "I can't lie down on my job. Ramona would n't ask it of me. I've got to go through. That 's what I'm paid for."

"She 's askin' it right now. Through me."

"Then she does n't understand what she's askin'. Let me talk with her. Let me explain —"

"We don't want any of yore damned explanations," interrupted Wadley roughly. "Talk turkey. Will you or won't you? Me, I ain't plumb crazy about law. It 's justice I want done. I'll be doggoned if I'm goin' to stand by an' let any harm come to Dinsmore — not this here year of our Lord."

"I'll do all I can for him —"

"Except that you're bound an' determined to see him hanged. You sure beat my time. I'd think you would be right anxious to tell him to cut his stick — kinda slide out inconspicuous when we ain't watchin'. Be reasonable, Roberts. That 's all I ask. I want to be yore friend if you 'll let me. My bank 's behind you to back any business proposition you want to start. Or that job I offered you before is open to you. After a little we can fix up some kind of a partnership."

The dark color burned under the tan of the

Ranger's face. His lips were like a steel trap, and in his eyes there was a cold glitter. "It does n't get you anywhere to talk thataway to me, Mr. Wadley. I'd want to marry Miss Ramona just the same if she was the poorest girl in the Panhandle. Offer me a deed to the A T O an' it would n't make any difference to me. I'm not goin' to turn Dinsmore loose because it 's to my advantage."

"Don't get on the prod, young fellow. I was n t tryin' to bribe you. I was showin' you how I felt. But you're so damned high-headed a plain man can't talk sense to you." The impulsive anger of the old Texan suddenly ripped out. "Hell, I'm not goin' to beg you to do what yore own decency ought to tell you right away. But I'll say this right off the reel: neither 'Mona nor I want to have a thing to do with a man who 's so selfish he can't yield the first favor she ever asked of him. We're through with you."

The two men had fallen back of the others and were riding alone. Now the young Texan looked hard at the old-timer. The eyes of neither of them gave way even for a beat of the lashes.

"I'll have to hear Miss Ramona say that before it goes with me," answered Roberts steadily.

"All right. You can hear it right this minute.' The cattleman touched his horse with the spur and cantered forward.

The Ranger was with him when they drew up beside Ramona. The smile in the eyes of the girl died away as she looked first at one and then at the other of them. She was sensitive to atmospheres, and if she had not been the harsh surface of both of them would have been evidence enough of a clash.

"Ramona," began her father, "this fellow here is a Ranger first an' a human bein' afterward. He 's hell-bent on takin' Dinsmore to prison so as to make a big name for himself. I've told him how we feel, an' he says that does n't make any difference a-tall, that Dinsmore 's got to hang."

"That is n't what I meant a-tall," explained Jack. "I've been tryin' to tell yore father that I'd give an arm to turn him loose. But I can't. It would n't be right."

The soft eyes of the girl pleaded with her lover. "I think we ought to free him, Jack. He saved my life. He fought for me. Nobody could have done more for me. He . . . he was so good to me." Her voice broke on the last sentence.

The young man swallowed a lump in his throat. "I wish I could. But don't you see I can't? I 'm not Jack Roberts, the man who . . . who cares for you. I'm an officer of the State sent out to bring in this man wanted for a crime. I've *got* to take him in."

"But he saved my life," she said gently, puzzled at his queer point of view. "He stayed with

me when he could easily have escaped. You would n't . . . take advantage of that, Jack?"

"I'll give every dollar I've got in the world to clear him, 'Mona. I'll fight for him to a finish. But I've got to take him to town an' put him in jail. If I don't I can't ever hold up my head again," he told her desperately.

"I thought you loved me, Jack," she murmured, through gathering tears.

"What kind of a man would I be for you to marry if I threw down on what was right just because you asked me to an' I wanted to do it?" he demanded.

"He's got his neck bowed, 'Mona. I told him how we felt, but he would n't believe me. I reckon he knows now," her father said.

"You're not goin' to throw me over because I've got to do what I think right, 'Mona?" asked Jack miserably.

"I . . . I'm not throwing you over. It's you. You're throwing *me* over. Don't you see that we've *got* to help Mr. Dinsmore because he did so much for me?"

"Certainly I see that. I'll resign from the Rangers, and then we'll all pull together for him, 'Mona."

"After you've pulled on the rope that hangs him," added Clint angrily. "Nothin' to that, 'Mona. He's for us or he's against us. Let him say which right now."

The girl nodded, white to the lips.

"Do you mean that you'll give me up unless I let Dinsmore escape before we reach town?" asked the young man.

"I . . . I've got to save him as he did me. If you won't help, it's because you don't love me enough," she faltered.

"I can't," the boy cried.

"'Nough said," cut in Wadley. "You've got yore answer, 'Mona, an' he's got his."

Jack stiffened in the saddle. His hard eyes bored straight into those of his sweetheart. "Have I?" he asked of her.

The girl nodded and turned her head away with a weak, little gesture of despair. Her heart was bleeding woe.

The Ranger wheeled on his horse and galloped back to his place beside Dinsmore.

CHAPTER XLIII

TEX RESIGNS

JACK ROBERTS, spurs jingling, walked into the office of his chief.

Ellison looked up, leaned back in his chair, and tugged at his goatee. "Well, Tex, you sure were thorough. Four men in the Dinsmore outfit, an' inside o' two days three of 'em dead an' the fourth a prisoner. You hit quite a gait, son."

"I've come to resign," announced the younger man.

"Well, I kinda thought you'd be resignin' about now," said the Captain with a smile. "Weddin' bells liable to ring right soon, I reckon."

"Not mine," replied Roberts.

Somehow, in the way he said it, the older man knew that the subject had been closed.

"Goin' to take that job Clint offered you?"

"No." Jack snapped out the negative curtly, explosively.

Another topic closed.

"Just quittin'. No reasons to offer, son?"

"Reasons a-plenty. I've had man-huntin' enough to last me a lifetime. I'm goin' to try law-breakin' awhile for a change."

"Meanin'?"

"You can guess what I mean, Captain, an' if

you're lucky you'll guess right. Point is, I'm leavin' the force to-day."

"Kinda sudden, ain't it, Tex?"

"At six o'clock to-night. Make a note of the time, Captain. After that I'm playin' my own hand. Understand?"

"I understand you're sore as a thumb with a bone felon. Take yore time, son. Don't go off half-cocked." The little Captain rose and put his hand on the shoulder of the boy. "I reckon things have got in a sort of kink for you. Give 'em time to unravel, Tex."

The eyes of the Ranger softened. "I've got nothin' against you, Captain. You're all there. We won't go into any whyfors, but just let it go as it stands. I want to quit my job — right away. This round-up of the Dinsmores about cleans the Panhandle anyhow."

"You're the doctor, Tex. But why not take yore time? It costs nothin' Mex to wait a day or two an' look around you first."

"I've got business — to-night. I'd rather quit when I said."

"What business?" asked Ellison bluntly. "You mentioned lawbreakin'. Aimin' to shoot up the town, are you?"

"At six to-night, Captain, my resignation takes effect."

The little man shrugged. "I hear you, Jack. You go off the pay-roll at six. I can feel it in my

bones that you're goin' to pull off some fool business. Don't run on the rope too far, Jack. Everybody that breaks the law looks alike to my boys, son."

"I'll remember."

"Good luck to you." Ellison offered his hand.

Roberts wrung it. "Same to you, Cap. So long."

The young man walked downtown, ate his dinner at the hotel, and from there strolled down to the largest general store in town. Here he bought supplies enough to last for a week — flour, bacon, salt, sugar, tobacco, and shells for rifle and revolvers. These he carried to his room, where he lay down on the bed and read a month-old Trinidad paper.

Presently the paper sagged. He began to nod, fell asleep. When he opened his eyes again it was late in the afternoon. His watch told him that it was just six o'clock.

He got up, took off the buckskin suit that had served him for a uniform, and donned once more the jeans and chaps he had worn as a line-rider.

"Good-bye, Mr. Ranger," he told himself. "I reckon you can't have much worse luck as a citizen than as an officer."

He buckled round his waist the belt that held his revolvers, and from the corner of the room where it stood took his rifle. Carrying the supplies he had that afternoon bought, he directed his steps to the Elephant Corral and saddled his

horse. With motions of deft economy he packed the provisions for travel, then swung to the saddle and cantered down the street.

At the post-office corner he swung to the left for a block and dismounted in front of a rather large dugout.

A wrinkled little man with a puzzled, lost-puppy look on his face sat on a bench in front mending a set of broken harness.

"'Lo, Tex. How they comin'?" he asked.

"'Lo, Yorky. Hope I see you well," drawled the horseman, a whimsical twitch of humor at the corner of his mouth. He was swinging his lariat carelessly as cowboys do.

"Jes' tol'able. I got a misery in my left shoulder I'm a-goin' to try some yerbs I done had recommended." Yorky was the kind of simple soul who always told you just how he was when you asked him.

Roberts passed him and led the way into the house. "Come inside, Yorky, I want to talk with you," he said.

The room into which the cowboy had passed was a harness shop. It was littered with saddles and bridles and broken bits of traces. A workman's bench and tools were in one corner of the shop. A door, bolted and padlocked, led to a rear room.

Jack put down his rifle and his belt on a shelf and sat down on the bench.

"Yore prisoner's in there all right," said the saddler with a jerk of his thumb over his left shoulder.

Since no one else in town would take the place, Yorky had been unanimously chosen jailer. He did not like the job, but it gave him an official importance that flattered his vanity.

"He's not my prisoner any more, Yorky. He's yours. I quit being a Ranger just twenty-five minutes ago."

"You don't say! Well, I reckon you done wise. A likely young fellow —"

"Where's yore six-shooter?" demanded Jack.

Yorky was a trifle surprised. "You're sittin' on it," he said, indicating the work bench.

Roberts got up and stood aside. "Get it."

The lank jaw of the jailer hung dolefully. He rubbed its bristles with a hand very unsure of itself.

"Now, you look a-hyer, Tex. I'm jailer, I am. I don't allow to go with you to bring in no bad-man. Nothin' of that sort. It ain't in the contract."

"I'm not askin' it. Get yore gat."

The little saddler got it, though with evident misgivings.

The brown, lean young man reseated himself on the bench. "I've come here to get yore prisoner," he explained.

"Sure," brightened the jailer. "Wait till I get

my keys." He put the revolver down on the table and moved toward the nail on which hung two large keys.

"I'm just through tellin' you that I'm no longer a Ranger, but only a private citizen."

Yorky was perplexed. He felt he was not getting the drift of this conversation. "Well, an' I done said, fine, a young up 'n' comin' fellow like you —"

"You've got no business to turn yore prisoner over to me, Yorky. I'm not an officer."

"Oh, tha's all right. Anything you say, Tex."

"I'm goin' to give him my horse an' my guns an' tell him to hit the trail."

The puzzled lost-dog look was uppermost on the wrinkled little face just now. Yorky was clearly out of his depth. But of course Jack Roberts, the best Ranger in the Panhandle, must know what he was about.

"Suits me if it does you, Tex," the saddler chirped.

"No, sir. You've got to make a fight to hold Dinsmore. He's wanted for murder an' attempted robbery. You're here to see he does n't get away."

"Make a fight! You mean . . . fight you?"

"That's just what I mean. I'm out of reach of my gats. Unhook yore gun if I make a move toward you."

Yorky scratched his bewildered head. This

certainly did beat the Dutch. He looked helplessly at this brown, lithe youth with the well-packed muscles.

"I'll be doggoned if I know what 's eatin' you, Tex. I ain't a-goin' to fight you none a-tall."

"You bet you are! I've warned you because I don't want to take advantage of you, since I've always had the run of the place. But you're jailer here. You've *got* to fight — or have everybody in town say you're yellow."

A dull red burned into the cheeks of the little man. "I don't aim for to let no man say that, Tex."

"That's the way to talk, Yorky. I've got no more right to take Dinsmore away than any other man." Jack was playing with his lariat. He had made a small loop at one end and with it was swinging graceful ellipses in the air. "Don't you let me do it."

Yorky was nervous, but decided. "I ain't a-goin' to," he said, and the revolver came to a businesslike position, its nose pointed straight for Roberts.

The gyrations of the rope became more active and the figures it formed more complex.

"Quit yore foolin', Tex, an' get down to cases. Dad-gum yore hide, a fellow never can tell what you honest-to-God mean."

The rope snaked forward over the revolver and settled on the wrist of the jailer. It tight-

ened, quicker than the eye could follow. Jack jerked the lariat sideways and plunged forward. A bullet crashed into the wall of the dugout.

The cowboy's shoulder pinned the little man against the bolted door. One hand gave a quick wrench to the wrist of the right arm and the revolver clattered to the puncheon floor. The two hands of the jailer, under pressure, came together. Round them the rope wound swiftly.

"I've got you, Yorky. No use strugglin'. I don't want to start that misery in yore shoulder," warned Jack.

The little saddler, tears of mortification in his eyes, relaxed from his useless efforts. Jack had no intention of humiliating him and he proceeded casually to restore his self-respect.

"You made a good fight, Yorky, — a blamed good fight. I won out by a trick, or I never could 'a' done it. Listen, old-timer. I plumb had to play this low-down trick on you. Homer Dinsmore saved Miss Wadley from the 'Paches. He treated her like a white man an' risked his life for her. She 's my friend. Do you reckon I'd ought to let him hang?"

"Why n't you tell me all that?" complained the man-handled jailer.

"Because you're such a tender-hearted old geezer, Yorky. Like as not you would 'a' thrown open the door an' told me to take him. You had to make a fight to keep him so they could n't say

you were in cahoots with me. I'm goin' to jail for this an' I don't want comp'ny."

Jack trussed up his friend comfortably with the slack of the rope so that he could move neither hands nor feet.

From the nail upon which the two keys hung the jail-breaker selected one. He shot back the bolts of the inner door and turned the key.

CHAPTER XLIV

DINSMORE GIVES INFORMATION

THE inner room was dark, and for a moment Jack stood blinking while his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom.

A voice growled a question at him. "What do you want now, Mr. Grandstander?"

"I want you."

"What for?"

"You'll find out presently. Come along."

For a moment Dinsmore did not move. Then he slouched forward. He noticed that the Ranger was not armed. Another surprise met him when he stepped into the outer room. The jailer lay on the floor bound.

The outlaw looked quickly at Roberts, a question in his eyes. Jack unlocked his handcuffs. They had been left on him because the jail was so flimsy.

"My rifle an' six-shooters are on the shelf there, Dinsmore. A horse packed with grub is waitin' outside for you. Make for the short-grass country an' cross the line about Deaf Smith County to the Staked Plains. I reckon you'll find friends on the Pecos."

"Yes?" asked Dinsmore, halfway between insolence and incredulity.

"That 's my advice. You don't need to take it if you don't want to."

"Oh, it listens good to me. I'll take it all right, Mr. Ranger. There are parties in Mexico that can use me right now at a big figure. The Lincoln County War is still goin' good." The bad-man challenged Roberts with bold eyes. "But what I'm wonderin' is how much Clint Wadley paid you to throw down Cap Ellison."

The anger burned in Jack's face. "Damn you, Dinsmore, I might 'a' known you'd think somethin' like that. I'll tell you this. I quit bein' a Ranger at six o'clock this evenin', an' I have n't seen or heard from Wadley since I quarreled with him about you."

"So you 're turnin' me loose because you 're so fond of me. Is that it?" sneered the outlaw.

"I'll tell you just why I'm turnin' you loose, Dinsmore. It 's because for twenty-four hours in yore rotten life you were a white man. When I was sleepin' on yore trail you turned to take Miss Wadley back to the A T O. When the 'Paches were burnin' the wind after you an' her, you turned to pick her up after she had fallen. When you might have lit out up the cañon an' left her alone, you stayed to almost certain death. You were there all the time to a fare-you-well. From that one good day that may take you to heaven yet, I dragged you in here with a rope around yore neck. I had to do it, because I was a Ranger. But

Wadley was right when he said it was n't *human*. I'm a private citizen now, an' I'm makin' that wrong right."

"You'd ought to go to Congress. You got the gift," said Dinsmore with dry irony. Five minutes earlier he had been, as Roberts said, a man with a rope around his neck. Now he was free, the wide plains before him over which to roam. He was touched, felt even a sneaking gratitude to this young fellow who was laying up trouble for himself on his account; and he was ashamed of his own emotion.

"I'll go to jail; that 's where I'll go," answered Jack grimly. "But that 's not the point."

"I'll say one thing, Roberts. I did n't kill Hank. One of the other boys did. It can't do him any harm to say so now," muttered Dinsmore awkwardly.

"I know. Overstreet shot him."

"That was just luck. It might have been me."

Jack looked straight and hard at him. "Will you answer me one question? Who killed Rutherford Wadley?"

"Why should I?" demanded the bad-man, his eyes as hard and steady as those of the other man.

"Because an innocent man is under a cloud. You know Tony did n't kill him. He 's just been married. Come clean, Dinsmore."

"As a favor to you, because of what you're doin' for me?"

"I'm not doin' this for you, but to satisfy myself. But if you want to put it that way —"

"Steve Gurley shot Ford because he could n't be trusted. The kid talked about betrayin' us to Ellison. If Steve had n't shot him I would have done it."

"But not in the back," said Jack.

"No need o' that. I could 'a' gunned him any time in a fair fight. We followed him, an' before I could stop him Gurley fired."

The line-rider turned to the jailer. "You heard what he said, Yorky."

"I ain't deef," replied the little saddler with sulky dignity. His shoulder was aching and he felt very much outraged.

"Ford Wadley was a bad egg if you want to know. He deserved just what he got," Dinsmore added.

"I don't care to hear about that. Yore horse is waitin', Dinsmore. Some one might come along an' ask inconvenient whyfors. Better be movin' along."

Dinsmore buckled the belt round his waist and picked up the rifle.

"Happy days," he said, nodding toward Jack, then turned and slouched out of the door.

A moment, and there came the swift clatter of hoofs.

CHAPTER XLV

RAMONA DESERTS HER FATHER

ARTHUR RIDLEY, seated on the porch between Clint Wadley and Ramona, was annoying one and making himself popular with the other. For he was maintaining, very quietly but very steadily, that Jack Roberts had been wholly right in refusing to release Dinsmore.

"Just as soon as you lads get to be Rangers you go crazy with the heat," said the cattleman irritably. "Me, I don't go down on my ham bones for the letter of the law. Justice! That's what I aim for to do. I don't say you boys have n't got a right to sleep on Dinsmore's trail till you get him. That's yore duty. But out here in Texas we'd ought to do things high, wide, an' handsome. Roberts, by my way of it, should have shook Homer's hand. 'Fine! You saved 'Mona's life. Light a shuck into a chaparral *pronto*. In twelve hours I'm goin' to hit the trail after you again.' That's what he had ought to have said."

"You're asking him to be generous at the expense of the State, Mr. Wadley. Jack could n't do that. Dinsmore's liberty was n't a gift of his to give. He was hired by the State — sent out to bring in that particular man. He had n't any choice but to do it," insisted Arthur.

Ramona sat in the shadow of the honeysuckle vines. She did not say anything and Ridley could not see her face well. He did not know how grateful she was for his championship of his friend. She knew he was right and her heart throbbed gladly because of it. She wanted to feel that she and her father were wrong and had done an injustice to the man she loved.

Captain Ellison came down the walk, his spurs jingling. In spite of his years the little officer carried himself jauntily, his wide hat tilted at a rakish angle. Just now he was worried.

As soon as he knew the subject of conversation, he plunged in, a hot partisan, eager for battle. Inside of two minutes he and Wadley were engaged in one of their periodical semi-quarrels.

"You're wrong, Clint," the Captain announced dogmatically. "You're wrong, like you 'most always are. You're that bullheaded you cayn't see it. But I'm surprised at you, 'Mona. If Jack had been a private citizen, you would n't needed to ask him to turn loose Dinsmore. But he was n't. That's the stuff my Rangers are made of. They play the hand out. The boy did just right."

"That's what you say, Jim. You drill these boys of yours till they ain't hardly human. I'm for law an' order. You know that. But I don't go out of my head about them the way you do. 'Mona an' I have got some sense. We're reasonable human bein's." To demonstrate his posses-

sion of this last quality Clint brought his fist down on the arm of the chair so hard that it cracked.

From out of the darkness Ramona made her contribution in a voice not quite steady.

"We're wrong, Dad. We've been wrong all the time. I did n't see it just at first, and then I did n't want to admit it even to myself. But I'm glad now we are." She turned to Captain Ellison a little tremulously. "Will you tell him, Uncle Jim, that I want to see him?"

"You're a little gentleman, 'Mona. I always said you were." The Captain reached out and pressed her hand. "I'll tell him when I see him. No tellin' when that'll be. Jack resigned to-day. He's got some fool notion in his head. I'm kinda worried about him."

The girl's heart fluttered. "Worried? What . . . what do you think he's going to do?"

The Captain shook his head. "Cayn't tell you, because I don't know. But he's up to somethin'. He acted kinda hard an' bitter."

A barefooted negro boy called in from the gate. "Cap'n Ellison there, sah?"

He brought a note in and handed it to the officer of Rangers. The Captain ripped open the envelope and handed the sheet inside to Ramona.

"Run along in an' read it for me, honey. It's too dark to see here."

The girl ran into the house and lit a lamp.

The color washed out of her face as she read the note.

Come up to the hotel and arrest me, Captain. I held up Yorky, took his keys, and freed Dinsmore.

JACK ROBERTS

Then, in jubilant waves, the blood beat back into her arteries. That was why he had resigned, to pay the debt he owed Homer Dinsmore on her account. He had put himself within reach of the law for her sake. Her heart went out to him in a rush. She must see him. She must see him at once.

From the parlor she called to Captain Ellison. "You'd better come in and read the note yourself, Uncle Jim. It's important."

It was so important to her that before the Captain of Rangers was inside the house, she was out the back door running toward the hotel as fast as her lithe limbs could carry her. She wanted to see Jack before his chief did, to ask his forgiveness for having failed him at the first call that came upon her faith.

She caught up with the colored boy as he went whistling up the road. The little fellow took a message for her into the hotel while she waited in the darkness beside the post-office. To her there presently came Roberts. He hesitated a moment in front of the store and peered into the shadows. She had not sent her name, and it was possible that enemies had decoyed him there.

"Jack," she called in a voice that was almost a whisper.

In half a dozen long strides he was beside her. She wasted no time in preliminaries.

"We were wrong, Dad and I. I told Uncle Jim to tell you to come to me . . . and then your note to him came. Jack, do you . . . still like me?"

He answered her as lovers have from the beginning of time — with kisses, with little joyous exclamations, with eyes that told more than words. He took her into his arms hungrily in an embrace of fire and passion. She wept happily, and he wiped away her tears.

They forgot time in eternity, till Ellison brought them back to earth. He was returning from the hotel with Wadley, and as he passed they heard him sputtering.

"Why did he send for me, then, if he meant to light out? What in Sam Hill — ?"

Jack discovered himself to the Captain, and incidentally his sweetheart.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" exclaimed Ellison. "You youngsters sure beat my time. How did you get here, 'Mona?"

Clint made prompt apologies. "I was wrong, boy. I'd ought to know it by this time, for they've all been dinnin' it at me. Shake, an' let's make a new start."

In words it was not much, but Jack knew by the way he said it that the cattleman meant a

good deal more than he said. He shook hands gladly.

"Looks to me like Jack would make that new start in jail," snapped the Captain. "I don't expect he can go around jail-breaking with my prisoners an' get away with it."

"I'll go to jail with him, then," cried 'Mona quickly.

"H'mp!" The Ranger Captain softened. "It would n't be a prison if you were there, honey."

Jack slipped his hand over hers in the semi-darkness. "You're whistlin', Captain."

"I reckon you 'n' me will take a trip down to Austin to see the Governor, Jim," Wadley said. "Don't you worry any about that prison. 'Mona."

The girl looked up into the eyes of her lover. "We're not worrying any, Dad," she answered, smiling.

CHAPTER XLVI

LOOSE THREADS

THE Governor had been himself a cattleman. Before that he had known Ellison and Wadley during the war. Therefore he lent a friendly ear to the tale told him by his old-time friends.

Clint did most of the talking, one leg thrown across the arm of a leather-bound chair in the library of the Governor's house. The three men were smoking. A mint julep was in front of each.

The story of Jack Roberts lost nothing in the telling. Both of the Panhandle men were now partisans of his, and when the owner of the A T O missed a point the hawk-eyed little Captain was there to stress it.

"That's all right, boys," the Governor at last broke in. "I don't doubt he's all you say he is, but I don't see that I can do anything for him. If he's in trouble because he deliberately helped a murderer to escape —"

"You don't need to do a thing, Bob," interrupted Wadley. "That's just the point. He's in no trouble unless you make it for him. All you've got to do is shut yore eyes. I spent three hours with a pick makin' a hole in the jail wall so as it would look like the prisoner escaped. I did a real thorough job. Yorky, the jailer, won't talk. We

got that all fixed. There'll be no trouble a-tall unless you want the case against Jack pushed."

"What was the use of comin' to me at all, then? Why did n't you boys keep this under your hats?" the Governor asked.

Wadley grinned. "Because of Jim's conscience. You see, Bob, he fills his boys up with talk about how the Texas Rangers are the best police force in the world. That morale stuff! Go through an' do yore duty. Play no favorites an' have no friends when you're on the trail of a criminal. Well, he cayn't ignore what young Roberts has done. So he passes the buck to you."

The Governor nodded appreciation of Ellison's difficulty. "All right, Jim. You've done your duty in reporting it. Now I'll forget all about it. You boys go home and marry those young people soon as they're ready."

The Panhandle cattleman gave a whoop. "That'll be soon as I can draw up partnership papers for me 'n' Jack as a weddin' present for him an' Mona."

They were married at Clarendon. All the important people of the Panhandle attended the wedding, and it was generally agreed that no better-looking couple ever faced the firing line of a marriage ceremony.

There was a difference of opinion as to whether the ex-line-rider deserved his good luck. Jumbo

Wilkins was one of those who argued mightily that there was no luck about it.

"That doggoned Tex wore his bronc to a shadow waitin' on Miss 'Mona an' rescuin' her from trouble. She plumb had to marry him to git rid of him," he explained. "I never saw the beat of that boy's gall. Six months ago he was ridin' the line with me. Now he's the *segundo* of the whole outfit an' has married the daughter of the boss to boot."

Jumbo was on hand with a sack of rice and an old shoe when the bride and groom climbed into the buckboard to drive to the ranch. His admiration found vent in one last shout as the horses broke into a run:

"Oh, you Tex! Let 'em go, son!"

TEXAS MAN

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Introducing Boone Sibley	1
II.	Across the Palo Pinto Country	10
III.	Boone Kills 'Em and Skins 'Em	21
IV.	Jumped!	26
V.	Tough Nut Wakes	37
VI.	Boone Meets Mr. Turley	44
VII.	Indirect Discourse	56
VIII.	Trouble in the Hills	65
IX.	Rustlers	75
X.	A Lone Hand	84
XI.	Miss Tilatha Raises Her Voice	92
XII.	At the McLennon Ranch	100
XIII.	Three Thousand Dollars, Dead or Alive	111
XIV.	Tilatha Does Not Know	120
XV.	A Flag of Truce	126
XVI.	"Like Buzzards to a Water Hole"	133
XVII.	Boone Takes a Long Chance	137
XVIII.	Doc Peters Changes His Mind	145

CHAPTER		PAGE
XIX.	The Quinns Deliver an Ultimatum	152
XX.	"Sheriff, Shake Hands with Mr. Sibley"	158
XXI.	Turley Passes the Buck	169
XXII.	Boone Gets Back His Sixshooters	177
XXIII.	The Roar of the Pack	182
XXIV.	Mobeetie Bill Draws a Black Bean	190
XXV.	Boone Gets a Job	198
XXVI.	Tilatha Blows Hot and Cold	210
XXVII.	Exit a Bad Citizen	216
XXVIII.	Tom Tracy Walks and Talks	224
XXIX.	Two Men	229
XXX.	The Russ Quinn Brand?	240
XXXI.	A Hot Trail	252
XXXII.	"Stick 'Em Up!"	261
XXXIII.	A Fracas	270
XXXIV.	Tilatha Makes a Decision	277
XXXV.	Boone Puts a Rope Around His Waist	286
XXXVI.	"A Close Call"	293
XXXVII.	Women Hanging Around	298
XXXVIII.	Whip Frees His Mind	305
XXXIX.	Tilatha Answers a Question	310
XL.	The Long Trail	315

TEXAS MAN

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING BOONE SIBLEY

BOONE SIBLEY was the issue of his ancestry and of the circumstances that nurtured him. No other time or place, no less elementary conditions of life, could have begot in him the peculiar individual force which sent him striding on his stark way through a pack of wolves snarling and snapping at him to drag him down. No civilization could have produced him but that frontier world of contrasts, at once so hard and so kind, so tragic and so indomitably gay. Only the strong survived. That Boone became notable in it connotes in him ruthless efficiency, deadly skill, and a nerve that never faltered.

He was born in Parker County, Texas, on the east bank of the Brazos. He first opened his eyes in a log cabin of one room, a cabin with a puncheon floor, a door of clapboards chinked with mud, and a stick-and-dirt chimney.

The furniture was as rough as the house. In the room were a home-made bench and stools, a table with a top the planks of which had been shaved by a drawing knife. His mother lay on a one-legged bedstead, the side and

end of which were mortised in the wall. The cooking utensils consisted of a three-legged skillet, a Dutch oven, a dinner pot, a tea kettle, an iron shovel, and some pot hooks. Dipped candles stuck in square blocks of wood, a hole bored to fit the end, lighted the house after dark.

For James and Callie Sibley were pioneers. Not at all for adventure, with no love of heroics, but merely in the hope of bettering their condition, they had pushed beyond the fringe of farthest settlement into the Indian country. They took their lives in their hands. The oxen yoked to their covered wagon trod the uncharted wilderness. His rifle shot the game that kept them alive. His ax chopped the trees for their cabin. She made his clothes and her own, even to her husband's cap of deerskin with the hair side out.

One of Boone's earliest memories was walking with his mother to the nearest neighbour, more than a mile away, to borrow fire. Matches on the Brazos were almost unknown. In every house were a piece of punk and a flint rock.

Callie was a splendid type of the pioneer woman, deep-bosomed, active, the glow of health in her cheeks. There was nothing with which she could not cope. Beside her husband and a companion she fought Indians, a rifle in her hands. She could treat a wound as deftly as she baked bread. Boone remembered her as a woman of smiles, tender, firm, filled with courage, a worthy helpmate to such a man as his father.

In James Sibley was a quiet force that made for leadership. He was slow-spoken, gentle of voice, well-

poised, influential because of his character. He would do, his neighbours said, "to ride the river with."

Another of the lad's early recollections had to do with two young women who stayed for a week or two at the Sibleys' house. Why they were there, who they were, he could not recall. But it was long before he could forgive them. They wanted to kiss him. He fled, resisted, fought to the bitter end, but was defeated ignominiously. It is possible that the genesis of his later attitude toward women may be found in this experience.

Boone was brought up in a world of work. His three older brothers built fences, herded cattle, or broke the prairie behind two yoke of oxen hitched to a turn plough. They carried rifles with them into the fields as a protection against the Comanches. While still in their early teens they helped their father stand off a bunch of ten roving raiders.

There were no girls in the family. Therefore it fell to Boone to help his mother. He was torn between conflicting impulses. His mother he loved devotedly, but while he churned, wiped dishes, or milked the cows the outraged manhood in his little body was in rebellion. This was woman's work. The shame of it abased him. He lived in continual dread lest some neighbour see him at his tasks and laugh at him.

On wash day the steaming clothes were dipped out of a boiler and put on a block made for the purpose. With a battling stick Boone beat the dirt out of them, one hand turning the sopping mass occasionally, the while his mother rubbed the garments after he had finished.

This was bad enough, but the quilting was almost more than he could bear. For weary hours he had to hand the threads through the harness of the loom. One day two young cowboys dropped in, caught him at it, and thoughtlessly made fun of him. They called him Miss Sallie.

Boone ran away that night. He took with him a big Sharp's rifle almost as long as himself. It was characteristic of the little fellow that he did not turn back toward Weatherford and civilization, but pushed north, hoping to get across the Brazos into the Palo Pinto country. An outfit of buffalo hunters were on the far side of the river. They had stopped at his father's place overnight, and one of them had asked Boone, as a joke, if he would go with them. He meant to join them now if he could.

The river was high for the time of year. The water was muddy and running fast. In the night it looked a fearsome adventure to attempt the crossing. He decided to ride farther up the stream on the lookout for a shallower place.

The boy had never been out alone so late at night. He had to steel his stout little heart against the fears that rose in him. The Indians might be all around him. Every clump of mesquite hid one or more, to his excited fancy. The whoop of a horn owl startled him. He pulled up, trembling with excitement. Boone knew that the Comanches, hunting horses at night, would keep in touch with each other by imitating these night birds. But he knew, too, that the sound of the horn owl carried no echo, that of the Indian's call did. He waited,

unmoving, till the hoot rang out again. There was no echo. Once more he dared to breathe as he put his pony in motion.

The first gray light of day was sifting into the sky when he crossed a pecan bayou and came to a ford. Very tired and sleepy, he tied the pony and sat down on the edge of the stream to wait until it was lighter. His eyes closed, fluttered open, drooped again. He was awakened by the sun's rays streaming into his face.

Boone sat up, startled. He must have been asleep for hours. The paint pony stood patiently where he had left it.

Thoughts of his mother, of the home, of the friendly family, flooded the youngster's mind. He had to choke down a lump in his throat. For he was both heartsick and hungry. But he did not for an instant waver. He pulled himself into the saddle and put the pinto at the stream. As he rode down he noticed wheel tracks. Very recently a wagon had crossed, probably within the past twenty-four hours. This was encouraging. If a wagon had made the ford, he could do it on horseback.

The pony sank deeper into the current as it moved forward. The swift water rose to its belly. Presently the hoofs of the horse were swept from the ground, and it was swimming. In a moment Boone knew that his life was at hazard. The river must have risen during the night.

Pluckily the pinto breasted the waters. The stretch of swift, deep current was not wide, but, as the pony fought to make headway, the youngster knew that the animal was not gaining. Its strength began to fail

before the pressure of the pounding flood. The bank of the river in front of the boy seemed to slide up.

Boone heard a shout. The loop of a rope snaked forward and dropped over his shoulders. He felt himself snatched out of the saddle and swept away. The waters swirled above his head. He was under the surface, struggling for breath. With a jerk, the rope brought him up, dragged him into shallower water. Sputtering and gasping, he was hauled ashore.

For a few moments he must have been unconscious. Out of a haze a voice came to him. "Came mighty nigh not cuttin' it."

A second voice answered: "The little skeezicks stuck to his rifle like death to a nigger's heel."

The boy opened his eyes. A bearded man knelt beside him. He was loosening a wet rope from the little fellow's body. A younger man, wet to the waist, had hold of the other end of the rope. Beside him, staring down at Boone, was a long-legged red-headed little girl.

She shrilled out in a burst of excitement: "He's openin' his eyes, Pappy."

"Sure is, Til," the older man assented.

Gravely the boy looked from one to another. "Did Pinto make it?" he asked.

"Got out thirty-forty rods lower down. He's sure whipped out, though. Boy, how come you to tackle the river? Where are yore folks, anyhow?"

"He's the teentiest li'l' thing," the girl cried. She was not very large herself, perhaps seven or eight years old.

Boone looked at her resentfully. "I'm not," he denied flatly.

"How old are you?" asked her father. .

"Eleven, comin' grass."

"Where you from?"

"From the yon side the river," Boone answered after a moment of deliberation. He had no intention of telling too much.

"Where was you aimin' to go?"

"To Wayne Lemley's buffalo camp."

The men stared at this amazing child. He had got up and was wringing water out of his coonskin cap.

"Not alone?" one of the men said.

Boone looked at him with dignity. "I'm not keerin' for company, seh."

"You'd go alone, right through the Injun country?"

"I aim to travel mostly at night."

The older man scratched his sandy hair. "He sure whips me."

His son grinned. "Looks like a motherless calf, but he surely has got spunk." Of Boone he asked a question. "Is yore paw at this buffalo camp?"

"No, seh."

"Who then?"

"I done told you. It's Wayne Lemley's camp."

"Now, see here, boy, you got no business here all by yoreself. It ain't safe. Where would you have been right now if I hadn't snaked you outa the Brazos?"

"Maybe I would have got out with Pinto; maybe not. I'm right much obleeged to you."

In so small a chap his imperturbability was surprising. His reserve repulsed all attacks upon his incapacity to look after himself.

The little girl offered a constructive suggestion. "Well, anyhow, he'll eat breakfast with us, Pappy."

The bearded man led the way to the covered wagon. "Come on, son. It's ready now."

"I've got yore company, seh," Boone answered with quaint courtesy.

The breakfast consisted of coffee, flapjacks, and pemmican, but the boy would not eat until he had reclaimed and hoppled the pinto. This done, he sat on his heels at the tail of the wagon and ate heartily. The child sat opposite and stared at him while he satisfied his hunger.

The camper introduced himself and family. "Our name is McLennon. My son's name is Hugh. The little girl is Tilatha."

"I'm Boone Sibley," the guest responded.

"Where are yore folks?"

"Down the river a ways."

"How come they to let you get so far from home?"

"I'm headin' for the buffalo camp."

"I heerd you the fust time, son. But I don't reckon you better try it. If I was you I'd cut dirt for yore folks' place. We'll see you acrost the river."

"I don't aim to go acrost the river," the boy said doggedly.

"Better run back, son. Have you got a father and a mother?"

"Yes, seh."

"Had some trouble with them, maybe. They whopped you, likely."

"No, seh. My father an' mother are the best folks in the world," Boone answered stoutly.

"Well, you go home to them. Cain't have you runnin' around thisaway."

"He's too li'l', ain't he, Pappy?" Tilatha volunteered complacently.

Boone looked at her and flushed. He had no use for girls anyhow. "I don't reckon it's none of yore business, is it?" he demanded.

Her eyes flashed. "You're a nasty li'l' boy. Tha's what you are," she countered swiftly.

"There—there. Don't you get red-haided, Til," her father chided. "I expect Boone is right. It ain't yore put-in. Little girls had orta speak when they are spoke to."

"He's only a li'l' boy," she protested. "Only he thinks he's so big."

"Shet yore mouth, child," McLennon chided. "Cain't you-all behave like a little lady?"

She subsided externally, but her eyes flamed defiance at the boy. Later, when her father's attention had been withdrawn for a moment, she spat her feeling out in words.

"'Bout *so* big," she hissed, measuring a distance on her forefinger with the adjoining thumb.

Boone looked at her, then looked away. After all, she was only a girl. Why let himself get annoyed? He had, even at this age, a capacity for silence.

CHAPTER II

ACROSS THE PALO PINTO COUNTRY

BOONE did not have with him a cent, but he would not have been able to use money if he had had any. In the pioneer Southwest the settlers did not go in debt, but work and supplies were often used as a medium of exchange instead of coin. He was beyond the farthest settlement, and in this wilderness there was nothing to sell. To offer to pay for a meal or a night's lodging would have been an insult. These were courtesies due every chance comer.

After breakfast he rose and thanked his host, as one man to another. "Much obleeged, Mr. McLennon. I reckon I'll be joggin' on."

Father and son exchanged looks.

"No need to push on yore reins," the older man drawled. "You're aimin' to travel nights, you say. Rest yore saddle and stick around with us awhile. Our stock is some gaunted. Feed is good here. We won't break camp for a day or two."

The boy considered this. It would be safer to stay till dark. He might meet a band of Comanches, and that would not be so good. On the other hand, there was always the chance that his father or one of his brothers might arrive and ignominiously take him home. Already, no doubt, they were casting over the country

on a search for him. If they should find his trail they might be here within a few hours.

"I'll shove on," he said.

McLennon shook his head. "Better not. We cut Injun sign yesterday. Maybe they're peaceable hunters and maybe they're not. Cain't ever tell. Give 'em a chance to get outa the neighbourhood."

"I'll watch keerful."

"No, son. Not for a while. If anything happened to you I couldn't forgive myself."

"There ain't anything gonna happen to me.'

"Not as long as you stay here. The camp is yours. Make yoreself to home. You and Til can play together."

Boone flushed angrily. They intended to detain him. He saw that. He resented this infringement on his individuality, but he knew that protest would be of no avail. It would be better to pretend to accept their decision, to assume that he was staying of his own free will. Unwittingly the mover had added to injury insult. Boone did not play with little girls. He wanted to say so, indignantly, but it seemed to him more dignified to ignore the suggestion.

He busied himself cleaning his rifle. This had to be done, anyhow, to avoid the chance of rust from the wetting it had received. Tilatha sat down on her heels and watched him. He paid no attention to her. Perhaps this did not please her. At any rate, she fired at him a verbal barb.

"Pap won't let you go 'cause you're so teeny."

Boone squinted into the barrel of the gun. He was

furious, but he did not want to give her the satisfaction of letting her know. Apparently, she was not on the map for him.

"My, you'll get a nawful whoppin' when yore pap comes," she continued.

This was altogether likely, but Boone did not care to hear prophecies on that subject. He finished cleaning the rifle and started to go toward the wagon to return a borrowed rag. Tilatha pretended to think that he was trying to escape. She shrieked for her father.

"Pap—Pap, he's fixin' to run away."

At once Boone lost what was left of his self-control. "Don't you *ever* mind yore own doggone business?" he cried. "'F I was yore pop I'd sure drown you."

"He's swearin' at me, Pap," she screamed.

Hugh sauntered up. He was used to his sister's little ways. "Shet up, Til, or I'll wear you to a frazzle. Dad's gone fishin'."

"You won't either. If you dass touch me——"

Hugh did not discuss the subject. He picked her up, deposited her in an empty flour barrel, put the lid on partially, and sat on it.

"You'll stay right there till you quit yelpin'," he informed her.

Miss Tilatha in turn threatened, wept, and promised amendment. When her brother thought her sufficiently subdued, he allowed her to return to society. She came back chastened and evidently rather proud of herself.

"I'm a nawful bad girl sometimes. Pap says I'm a limb," she confided to Boone.

"What are you allowin' to do at the buffalo camp?" Hugh asked the boy.

"Kill 'em, skin 'em, salt 'em down."

Hugh suppressed a grin. This midget spoke as though he were of mature age. Even on the frontier, where circumstances develop men young, Boone would hardly pass as an adult. Hugh himself was nineteen, and he did not consider that he had been grown up more than two years.

"Can you handle that cannon you carry?" he asked, pointing at the rifle.

"I've made out to kill two-three deer, an antelope, an' se-ve-real turkeys with it," Boone answered with dignity.

"Deer an' turkeys ain't buffalo."

"No. Buffaloes are bigger an' easier to hit."

True to her sex, Tilatha made an about face shamelessly. "Bet yore boots Boone could kill a buffalo 'f he wanted to."

"Little girls don't bet their boots," reproved Hugh.

Tilatha exonerated herself with characteristic logic. "I wasn't bettin' *my* boots. I was bettin' *yore* boots." She added, not without malice, "'N' if you don't stir yore stumps you'll lose the mules, too. They've strayed clear over the hill."

Her brother turned on his elbow and took one look. The mules were out of sight. It would not do to let them get too far away, for there was always the possibility that Indians might stampede them. He rose and moved away to drive back the straying animals.

Before he had gone a dozen yards Tilatha was whis-

pering eagerly to Boone: "Now's yore chance. Saddle up an' ride lickety split."

Boone looked at her, astonished. Less than half an hour ago she had been in battle drawn with him. Now she seemed to be on his side. He half suspected treachery, and yet . . .

"Hurry, slowpoke," she urged. "Ain't you got no sense a-tall?"

The boy rose to swift action. He caught the hoppled pony, brought it back to camp, and with difficulty got the heavy saddle on its back. One of the skirts was doubled under. He pulled this out and cinched the girths of the double-rigged saddle.

She watched him, a forefinger pressed against her lower lip. Now that he was going she had discovered that she did not want him to go.

"Oh, Boone, maybe the Injuns will get you," she wailed.

"They will *not*," he answered promptly, preparing to mount

She sidled closer. "But they might. 'F I never see you again, Boone?"

The boy was not sentimentalizing the situation. He did not care whether he ever saw her or not. But since she had had a change of heart he did not want to be impolite.

"S' long," he said, reaching for the horn and the cantle.

She took advantage of his distraction to throw her arms tightly around his neck and kiss the nearest cheek. Furiously embarrassed, Boone pushed her from him,

glared at her a fraction of a second, and dragged himself to the saddle seat. He dug his heels into the sides of the pony, and it started at a lope.

Tilatha flung after him her defiance. "You're a nasty, horrid li'l' boy, 'n' I knew it all the time."

He did not look back. The shame of what had taken place burned him up. To be kissed by a girl! Bah! What was the matter with them, anyhow? Why couldn't they leave a fellow alone?

Boone caught sight of Quinn and veered to the right. He paid no attention to the camper's shout for him to stop. The man tried to head him off, but the youngster put his pony at full speed. Quinn stopped running.

Out of sight, beyond the next rise, Boone began working away from the river. They might pursue him, and he wanted to be hidden deep among the land waves that rolled westward. All day he travelled, guiding his course by the sun. He went cautiously, watching for Indians. If he was seen by them, they might or might not kill him. But they would certainly take his pony, and to be left unhorsed on the plains might mean death, since, as a matter of course, they would rob him of his rifle.

Late in the afternoon he hid in a grape thicket and slept. When he awoke, the moon rode high in the heavens. He mounted and rode toward the river. It was necessary for him to find the wheel tracks at the lower ford so that he would know the direction taken by the buffalo hunters.

He was hungry, for he had not eaten since breakfast. The country was full of game both large and small,

but he had been afraid to fire his rifle for fear of attracting attention.

Young as he was, there was no danger of his getting lost as long as he could see the sun by day and the stars at night. He was far more competent to look after himself alone on the plains than a tenderfoot of twice his age. He had been brought up in a school of hard experience which had no vacations.

When he reached the river, he turned down it and followed the bank to the ford. In the brush, a little way back from this, he dismounted, picketed the pony, and slept again. Not till daylight did he awake.

Boone picked up the wagon tracks of the hunters, but before he followed them he looked longingly across the river. He had backtracked almost to his home. The house and clearing were hidden in a hollow half a mile or more down stream. He could not see them, but their location was indicated by a banner of smoke rising in the clear morning air. His mother was probably baking biscuits and frying ham. Almost he could sniff the aroma of her coffee.

It did not even occur to him that he might go back home. He had started for the buffalo camp and he meant to go there. The wagon tracks led westward, into the unknown wilds of Palo Pinto. Where they went, he too intended to go.

When he could endure hunger no longer, he shot a prairie hen. As soon as possible he got away from the place. He had travelled a couple of miles before he could consider eating it. To light a fire, even if he had had punk and flint with him, would have been dangerous.

He ate the hen raw, much to his disgust. But he had to preserve his strength. How far he would have to travel before reaching the camp he did not know.

Late in the afternoon he began to see buffalo, at first in small bunches, later in larger ones. About dusk he saw smoke. Either the buffalo camp or a party of Indians lay just ahead of him. He waited in the brush, from a little elevation watching the camp as well as he could in the failing light for signs to tell him whether these were friends or foes. It was too dark to see whether there were wagons there.

A man moved away from the fire and crossed a small open space toward the horses. As he walked, his arms swung by his sides. Boone gave a small whoop of joy. Indians do not swing their arms when they walk. He rode straight into the camp, calling out his presence as he approached. Otherwise some startled hunter might drill him through with lead before he discovered who the stranger was.

Four rifles covered Boone while he drew near.

"Be keerful, stranger. Keep yore hands right where they're at," a man in fringed buckskin ordered. Then, in surprise, he added, "Dog my cats, it's a kid—Jim Sibley's young un! What in Texas are *you* doing here?"

The man was Wayne Lemley. He lowered his buffalo gun and waited for an explanation. The hunter felt a little sheepish. In spite of the watch always maintained, the camp had been taken unawares. If, instead of this boy, Kiowas or Comanches had got as close, there might by this time have been one outfit of hunters the less.

"I jest drapped in to hunt with you," Boone explained.

They gathered around him, half a dozen bearded unkempt men, everybody in camp except the two on guard.

"Yore paw back there in the brush?" asked Lew Keener, a lank, grizzled old-timer who had been with Kirby Smith's troops during the war.

"No, seh, he ain't."

"Who then?"

"I came alone."

"Alone?"

Boone slid stiffly from the saddle. "Why, yes," he said.

"Alone—from the yon side the river?" Lemley queried.

The small boy adjusted the "one-gallus" trousers, the legs of which had climbed during the long ride. "I done told you twice," he said evenly. "Mr. Mattock axed me to come, didn't he?"

Mattock tugged at his ragged red beard, almost too amazed for speech. He wore a leather hunting shirt reaching almost to his boots.

"By Ginney, I did ask the little tadpole—kinda funnin' to pass the time, but Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, I didn't figure he'd fly to it thisaway, Wayne."

Lemley was hard to convince. Somehow, he knew it was true, the little fellow was so serious and matter of fact. But that a child would travel for days alone through the Indian country was unbelievable.

"How come Jim Sibley to leave you start?" he demanded.

"He didn't know I was comin'. I started at night."

"But what for?"

"Like I said. To hunt with you-all."

"You ran away from home to hunt with us?"

The little boy corrected gravely this method of stating the fact. "I didn't exactly run away. I jest left."

"Well, I'll say you shore had nigger luck gettin' through to us," Keener commented.

Mattock took from the pocket of his shirt a plug of tobacco and bit off a generous portion. Chewing always helped cerebration for him.

"Something seldom about this kid," he said, falling into a bit of local slang.

"What you aim to do with him, Wayne, now he's wished himself on you?" asked Keener with a grin.

"I dunno. Reckon we'll have to keep him here till his folks come for him or till we go back. Cain't send him home. Take too long to close-herd him back across the river."

"That's its shape," agreed another hunter, one who for obvious reasons went by the name of Peg Leg. "We're not to blame because he came."

Boone summarized the situation calmly. "Nothin' to do but let me stay. I'll work like the Watsons. You've got another hand. That's all."

"Hmp! What about yore folks?" Keener interjected.

"I won't pester you-all to take me home. I'll stay long as there's a button on Jabe's coat."

"All right. That's settled," Lemley said grimly. "An' to start you right I'm gonna tan yore hide proper for runnin' away. You shag along with me back of that wagon, son, an' take what's comin' to you."

The boy shagged obediently to the spot named.

Lemley picked up a whip and followed him.

CHAPTER III

BOONE KILLS 'EM AND SKINS 'EM

BOONE was the handy lad about camp. He hoppled horses, helped hitch the teams, flunkied for the cook, and did odd jobs. The hunters called him Pocket Change and made him the victim of their harmless jokes. But they watched over him, curbed his adventurous spirit, and would have protected him with their lives. The pioneer settlers of the Western frontier were fearless, independent, and generous. Each was a personality in his own right, but all accepted the common code of hospitality and friendliness, of standing by each other in trouble, of going the limit to help a neighbour. As an old-timer put it once, there were mighty few cutbacks in the herd.

The lad was a willing worker and soon became popular in the camp. He did cheerfully whatever task was assigned him, and he was so self-contained that the men did not realize what a surge of homesickness sometimes swept over him. It was chiefly at night, when he was in bed under a buffalo robe, that the lonesome child in him was uppermost and cried out for his mother's arms and her warm smile of understanding sympathy.

Sometimes the boy rode out with the men and helped skin the dead buffaloes. He held the reins while the

hides were loaded into the wagon to be brought to the camp, and later he joined those who pegged down the pelts to sun-dry on a knoll. Under the direction of the old Confederate soldier Keener, who had taken a fancy to him, he spent days scraping away drying bits of flesh still clinging to the hides. The smell from the improvised drying yard rose to heaven, but Boone became used to it in time so that he was scarcely aware of it.

He was eager to go hunting with the others, but there was less danger in camp, and Lemley left him with those detailed to guard it. Strict instructions were given him never to wander away into the shinnery in the sandhills. Plenty of prairie chickens fed among the oak bushes, but there was always the chance that Comanches or Kiowas might be lurking there waiting for an opportunity to drive away the stock or to jump the camp.

From listening to so many stories by the hunters, Boone knew just how the buffaloes were killed. Early in the morning the men would take their big fifty Sharp's rifle, loaded with long shells carrying one hundred and ten grains of powder, and ride toward the feeding ground. They approached on the windward side of the herd, keeping out of sight and dismounting a quarter of a mile or more away. From this point they crept closer, picked out a victim, and shot it just back of the fore shoulder from such an angle that the ball would penetrate the lungs.

The report of the gun would frighten the herd and the leaders would start a run. A bullet would kick up

the dirt in front of them and turn the moving mass. This would be repeated. Presently the herd began to mill round and round, after which the animals could be shot at leisure.

Boone's chance came one day. A stampeded herd came thundering past the camp, shaking the earth with the impact of their tread. The boy seized his rifle and ran out to a small rise. The sight was one to inspire awe. There were thousands upon thousands of the bison. They were packed close, and their backs lifted and fell like the waves of an undulating sea. The sheer momentum of their rush would have swept into kindling the frame walls of a house had there been one in their path.

"Golly, they're comin' lickety brindle," the boy called to Keener.

They were scarcely a hundred yards from him. He knelt, took aim, and fired. Five times he shot before the herd had passed. When the roar of their charge had died away, he saw that two bulls were down, a third was staggering and coughing as it stumbled in the wake of its fellows.

For once Boone lost his unmoved manner. He had killed bison, three of them. They were bulls, to be sure, and the hides of bulls were less valuable than those of cows, but that was of small importance to him now. He was a buffalo hunter at last.

He shouted to Keener: "Lookee! Lookee what I did!"

The old Arkansan came up from the camp grinning. He had slain his thousands, but he understood the thrill of the boy's first kill.

"Bully, boy! You sure went to 'em all spraddled out," he said by way of congratulation. "Yore old Sharp's bites as well as barks, son."

"I'm gonna skin 'em myself," Boone said.

This he did, with the exception of some help in turning the animals. Before night he had the hides pegged out on the drying ground.

Boone could hardly wait for the hunters to get home to learn what he had done. He did not intend to tell them himself. He meant to listen while Keener and the other two guards retailed the story.

But to his surprise none of them mentioned what had taken place. They smoked their pipes around the camp fire and chatted about anything else except the buffaloes he had killed.

After a time he could stand it no longer. He offered them a lead. "A whoppin' big herd came rarin' past here to-day on a stampede," the boy suggested.

"A herd of jackrabbits?" asked Mattock politely.

"No, seh. A herd of buffaloes."

"Three of 'em drapped dead clost to camp," one of the guards said.

"Got tired runnin' likely," Peg Leg guessed.

"They didn't either," Boone protested indignantly. "I shot 'em."

Lemley spoke to Keener, nodding his head toward Boone. "Gets notions sometimes, I've noticed. When he shoots a quail he thinks it's a turkey. Did he shoot something to-day?"

"Three polecats," answered the old soldier gravely. "He was right proud of 'em. Cut up the hams an' hung

'em on a tree, an' stretched the hides out on the dryin' ground. He aims to take 'em home for keepsakes."

"He knows better, 'cause he helped me skin 'em," the boy denied.

"Well, they're out on the ground all pegged out proper. The moon's riz. What say we go look at 'em!" Keener proposed.

They trooped out, half a dozen of them, and inspected the hides.

"That's right, polecats," Peg Leg announced after one look at them.

Boone could have wept with chagrin, but he did not. He perceived that this was a conspiracy of alleged humour to minimize his achievement.

"How many thousand head did you-all say was in that herd of polecats, Boone?" asked Mattock

Boone took refuge in dignified silence. He knew they would banter him until they got tired of the subject. Probably he had been a little too set-up about what he had done. This was his punishment. Or maybe they were doing it because it amused them. He never could tell in advance what would and what would not make them laugh.

Next morning the boy won his reward. Lemley said to him after breakfast, "Want to slap a saddle on that broomtail of yours, Boone, an' come along with us to shoot some more polecats?"

The shining eyes of the boy were answer enough. He could scarcely eat his breakfast. Long before the others were ready, he sat Pinto, the old Sharp's in hand, waiting impatiently for the start.

CHAPTER IV

JUMPED!

DAY or night the guard at the buffalo camp was never relaxed. The fact that no Comanches or Kiowas had been seen was no evidence that they were not watching the hunters from the cap rock or the brakes. Men never left the wagons, even to go as far as the drying grounds, without carrying their rifles as a matter of course. They had their revolvers strapped on while they sat at supper. Weapons were within reach as they slept.

One morning Boone returned from the creek with a barrel of water on a lizard.* Keener walked beside him as a guard. The boy drove the mule to the end of the wagon where the cooking was done.

Lemley called to him after he had unhitched: "How'd you like to go home, son?"

The boy's heart leaped. Every night now he had to remember that he was a man to keep from crying himself to sleep. He longed passionately to see his mother. His conscience reproached him for having left her in the way he had. He knew now, by some intuition denied

*A lizard was a fork of a tree used as a sled to haul stones or water. When employed for the latter purpose, a crosspiece held the barrel and four standards kept it from tipping over.

him at the time, how much she must have suffered, how greatly she must have feared for his safety.

"I'd be right glad to go, seh," he said in a quiet voice that belied the tumult in his breast.

"I'm sending back two of the wagons to-morrow loaded with hides. You can go along if you like."

"I sure would." Boone's lips trembled. He felt a surge of emotion well up in him. In order that nobody might see the quick tears spring to his eyes, he stooped, took off one boot, and pretended to shake out of it a pebble.

Lemley strolled closer. "Son, don't ever do a thing like that again—runnin' away from home, I mean. You'll never know how you've torn yore mother's heart. I wouldn't give a barrel of shucks for a boy who is not good to his mother. Mrs. Sibley is a fine woman, one of the very best. I hope yore father will whop you proper when you get back, an' if I know Jim Sibley, he'll do his duty."

"Yes, seh, I reckon he will," Boone agreed.

"You're not an ornery boy, Boone. You work an' you do what you're told. You're not sassy. That's why I don't want you to grow up ugly as galvanized sin."

"I—I aim to be good to my mother," Boone said, a catch in his voice.

"Well, see you do." Lemley desisted from further preaching. "Better not ride yore pinto to-day. You'll be using him pretty hard for two-three days."

The wagon outfit started for the river at dawn. Three men went with it, in addition to Boone.

"I don't reckon you'll have any trouble with In-

juns," Lemley said to Keener, who was in charge of the party. "We haven't seen hide or hair of any since we've been out. But you want to be watchin' all the time."

The old Confederate nodded. "I ain't forgettin' the old scout's advice, 'When you see Injun sign, be keerful; when you don't see any, be more keerful.' No, sir, I don't aim to throw down on myself."

"Push on the reins right lively an' you had ought to reach the river late to-night. Well, I wish you luck. So long, Boone. Tell yore father I gave you a good blacksnakin', an' maybe he'll go easier on you."

The wagons moved away across the prairie, one following the other closely. Keener led the way on horseback, both to keep a lookout against attack and to pick the best road for the teams. Boone also was in the saddle. He was not in the least worried about Indians. He had heard about their atrocities all his life, but he had never seen first-hand evidence of these. Probably there were no Kiowas or Comanches within a hundred miles.

Keener did not stop the party to eat at noon. He wanted to get across the Brazos as soon as possible. They made good time until the middle of the afternoon, when the trail became very rough and jolty. Both drivers complained that their loads were slipping.

To carry hides a long distance it was necessary to fold the hides, hair side in, before they became flint dry, to load with the legs lapping in the wagon, and to tie the whole down with ropes. These hides had become too dry to fold and had been piled into the wagon flat.

The old soldier called a consultation. It was decided to hold the loads down with boom poles. About a mile to the left of the wagons ran a creek lined with cottonwoods.

"The kid an' I will ride over to the creek an' cut some poles," Keener said. "We'll take a single tree and chain with us to drag 'em back. While we're gone you two had better reload the wagons."

Boone rode with Keener to the creek. They had to drop down through a hackberry thicket to its banks out of sight of the wagons. The ex-Confederate swung from the saddle, laid his rifle against a log, and chopped down a couple of springy poles.

The sound of a shot reached them, of a second, then of half a dozen.

Boone never forgot the sight of Keener's face. He looked as though Death had reached out and touched him. A wave of terror engulfed the boy.

"Injuns!" he cried.

"Stay here!" ordered Keener. "I'm going to the brow of the rise. Back in a little while."

Keener moved swiftly up through the hackberry thicket. He knew that the Indians must have been watching the wagon outfit and must have seen him and Boone ride away. Even before he reached the ridge the firing had died down. When he saw the wagons, one glance confirmed his fears. More than a score of mounted warriors surrounded the outfit. Keener believed the teamsters were dead. They were old frontiersmen, and given time to put up a fight would never let themselves fall alive into the hands of the savages. But.

dead or alive, he could do nothing for them. He had to think of the boy's life and his own.

That they were in imminent danger he knew. Not for a moment would the raiders forget them. Through the brakes he caught sight of a party of riders heading for the creek, swinging a little to the west in order to cut them off from the camp left that morning.

Keener turned. Frightened eyes, set in the boy's white face, stared at him.

"I couldn't stay back there," Boone whispered.

"We'll have to light out an' shove for the river," the old soldier said.

They ran back through the thicket to their horses. Keener flung the lad into his saddle to save time. Boone's heart was beating wildly. He would be caught and killed. If they could, they would take him alive and torture him.

"D-don't leave me," he begged of his friend as they rode up the hillside on the other bank of the creek.

The voice of the old Arkansan came evenly to him. "Don't you get skeered, son. I'll be right with you. We've got a head start, an' we'll beat 'em from where they laid the chunk. We cain't fly, but we can catch birds."

They caught their first sight of the pursuing Indians from the top of a little draw. At the same time the savages saw them and let out the yell that has shaken many a soul. There were perhaps a dozen of them, still on the far side of the creek, about three hundred and fifty or four hundred yards distant.

The sound of that yell, the swift glance he took at

the naked riders behind, melted the boy's courage. He began to whimper.

"None of that," ordered his companion curtly. "You got to go through. We'll cut the mustard if you've got sand in yore craw."

They were riding for the river, still twenty miles away, over a very rough country. Keener watched his chance, guided with his knees, and fired his "big fifty" without slackening the pace. A pony stumbled and fell. The Indians answered the shot, but they were outranged, and their bullets fell short.

Boone was riding in front. He lifted his rifle from the saddle.

"No, son," Keener told him. "Right now I'll do all the shootin' is necessary. You 'tend to yore ridin'."

"There's more of 'em—over to the right," Boone cried.

"I 'lowed there would be. We'll keep right on for the cap rock—won't let 'em drive us back if we can help it."

To Boone this looked suicidal. They and the Indians were converging toward a common point.

"We'll beat 'em to it," the plainsman said.

His voice rang out more confidently than the facts justified. They would beat the natives to the cap rock if let alone. But how close would those coming up from the right be when they passed? If he and the boy won through it would be by a narrow margin, Keener knew. But he dared not let himself be driven into the open country to the left. Their one chance was to outride the Comanches trying to intercept them.

Keener rode on the right side of the boy, between him and the Indians. Twice he fired, riding at full speed. Presently bullets began to throw dirt in front of and behind their horses.

"We'll make it. They can't shoot for beans," the old-timer shouted. "Ride hell-for-leather, son. We'll be past in a minute now."

Even as he spoke, a bullet struck his horse. Keener was flung over its head as it went down. Boone pulled up, hardly by conscious volition, but rather by automatic instinct. The unhorsed man snatched up his rifle, ran toward the boy, and vaulted on the back of the pony behind the saddle. Instantly Pinto struck into a gallop again.

The rock rim was less than half a mile from the fugitives. The Comanches were pressing them closely. During that wild ride Keener's buffalo gun did deadly execution. It dropped two horses. It sent one brave flying from his mount.

As they drew close to the rock rim, Keener gave instructions. "Listen, son. We got one chance—just one. I'll jump off above the rock rim. You keep on going. Head for the low ford. Get to yore father's place an' bring me help."

"But——"

The voice of the old soldier was harsh and final. "Don't argue. Do as I say. An', boy, ride like the Watsons."

They rode straight for a break in the rampart of rocks. Keener dropped from the pony, and it clambered

up the rock fault like a mountain goat. Hard on its heels came the buffalo hunter.

Boone obeyed orders. Without stopping, he rode forward across the mesa. Once he looked back. No Indians were in view, but he could hear their blood-freezing yelps down below. Keener lay on his face. The boom of his buffalo gun sounded once and again. Then, borne clear on the thin air, came the defiant Rebel yell the old fellow had learned when he rode with Kirby Smith's raiders.

The boy did not know it at the time, but that ringing yell was Wesley Keener's gallant challenge to Death. He had come to the end of the trail and was going out like a soldier.

Steadily Boone covered the miles. A thousand times he looked back, fearful lest his eyes fall upon a line of bobbing riders. Once, in the shinnery, he started some antelopes, and the sound of them crashing through the oak bushes gave him a moment of panic.

The pinto was labouring heavily. His feet began to drag. The little paint horse had answered every call upon his strength made by Boone, but as he dragged through the sand now his feet stumbled. Dusk was falling. The river must be near, but the boy doubted if the horse could make the crossing.

He dismounted, to relieve the pinto in the heavy sand. The pony's head drooped more and more. He staggered and fell, never to rise again.

Boone walked toward the river. Darkness came. He ploughed doggedly forward. The moon rose. At last

—the river. He had struck the Brazos within a half mile of the home crossing. Following the bank, he came to the ford.

The water was low. At another time Boone might not have attempted it. But he thought of Keener, fighting for his life on the rock rim. He must get help to him. Soon.

The boy waded in. He knew the tricks of the current at this point, for he had been across the ford twenty times with his father and brothers. Here there was a sand bar. There the current ran deep. By bearing to the right one found the place where the stream was wider and therefore shallower.

Water rose to his waist but no higher. He reached in safety the farther shore. At once, exhausted though he was, he turned toward the hollow where lay his home. He reached the head of the hollow and looked down. They were there, the house, the clearing, the worm fence surrounding the pasture. The hounds were barking. He could see them running into the open, half a dozen of them, yelping a warning that someone was coming.

A lump swelled in the throat of the boy. Home at last! Home after many wanderings!

He moved down into the clearing. The dogs recognized him, ran forward, and leaped at him joyfully in a din of yelpings. He pushed through them to the house, past the ash hopper from which lye was dripping.

From inside the cabin his father's voice called: "Who's there?"

"It's me, Boone," the boy answered.

The door was flung open. James Sibley, half dressed, caught Boone in his arms with a little sob of relief. He had given up his son for dead, and he was alive and close.

Callie ran out. "What is it? What is it?" she cried, sure somehow that there was news about the little boy who nowadays was never out of her mind. At sight of Boone she stopped.

"Mother!" he cried, and flung himself upon her.

She caught him to her bosom. When she spoke it was in a voice he did not recognize. "My boy! My li'l' baby!"

The older sons joined the group.

Presently, the first burst of emotion past, James Sibley asked, "Where have you been?"

"With the buffalo hunters. Mr. Lemley sent me back with the wagons." The boy's voice broke. There had come back to him, forgotten for a moment in the joy of his homecoming, the tragic story of his return. "The Injuns jumped us. They—killed the drivers. Mr. Keener, he stayed to fight them."

"With the other men?"

"No—alone. They killed his horse. He said for me to bring help."

"How many Injuns?"

"A lot—thirty-forty, maybe."

Sibley roused himself to instant action. He sent his sons on horseback to gather the neighbours. Three hours later, a small rescue party crossed the river headed for the rim rock. In all there were nine of them, heavily armed. Boone was at home in bed, safely tucked up

by his mother. His protest that they could not find the place without him had been summarily dismissed.

"I'm sending yore father an' the three boys. That's enough of the family for one time," Callie said grimly.

She knew they were going on a forlorn hope. Keener had chosen to give his life that her little boy might live. He had held back the Indians long enough for Boone to escape. But she had no expectation that the rescuers would find him alive. Moreover, there was always the chance that James Sibley's party would be ambushed and wiped out. The Indians were in far greater numbers. They were wily warriors. The mother waited all through the night and most of the next day in an anguish of dread, and while she waited she sat in the cabin with weapons ready in case the Indians should cross the river and attack.

It was late afternoon when the posse rode into the clearing. They were tired and hungry and caked with dust. The dry lather on the horses showed how hard they had been ridden.

Callie made dinner for them while her husband told the story of their adventure. They had seen no Indians from first to last. At the rim rock they had found the body of Wesley Keener. Around him, on the rock where he lay, were dozens of shells flung out from the buffalo hunter's gun after he had emptied them. There were no dead Indians in sight. The raiders had taken their casualties with them, as was their custom. But Keener was a dead shot. It was certain the attackers had paid heavy toll before the old soldier had sent the last shot crashing through his own brain.

CHAPTER V

TOUGH NUT WAKES

TOUGH NUT lay in a coma of sunshine. Apache Street was almost deserted. A hound crossed the dusty road, leisurely pursued by a three-year-old child giving orders in a piping voice.

"Tum here, Tarlo, dod-done you."

Carlo went his way, magnificently oblivious of the infant. Drooping horses waited patiently at the hitch racks in front of the saloons. A grocery clerk came out of a store and from a watering can sprinkled the hot ground in front.

A four-mule team came down the street. The fine yellow dust of travel lay thick on the canvas covering the load. The mule skinner, Boone Sibley, now grown to manhood, was a stranger to Arizona. He had come to Cochise County from New Mexico by way of the San Simon Valley. Already he was pleased with Tough Nut. It sat on the top of the world. A roll of hills and valleys fell away on either side to the shining mountains, to the Mules and the Whetstones, the Dragoons and the Huachucas. The miles of cholla and greasewood and mesquite in that panorama of space were telescoped to a minimum in the clear, untempered light of the champagne atmosphere.

The adobe town was clean. The road of disintegrated

granite gave evidence of municipal pride. Tough Nut belied its name, its evil reputation. So Boone Sibley decided. It was a nice town, and peaceful as old age. He was glad he had come. His arms and his long lithe body stretched in a yawn of indolent well-being. Soon he would hit the hay. For thirty hours he had not slept. Grub first, then sleep. Yes, a real nice, quiet town. That woman now going into the butcher shop with the baby in her arms . . .

A shot shattered the stillness. Through the swing doors of a saloon burst a man. He was small, past the prime of life. As he ran, odd sounds came from his throat. They were not yelps or shouts, nor were they moans; rather a combination of all three. The awkwardness of his flight would have been comical but for the terror on his face.

A big man, revolver in hand, tore through the doors in pursuit. Another shot ripped the silence. The little man staggered, stumbled, and went down just beside the wagon. With swift strides the gunman moved toward him. The eyes in his bearded face blazed.

Boone Sibley lived by the code of the West. This was a private difficulty. Therefore, none of his business. He started to slide from the far side of the wagon in order to use it as a bulwark between him and stray bullets.

Started to do so, but changed his mind. The hound had come around the tail of the wagon, and hard on its heels the three-year-old. The bearded man, intent on the kill, did not see the youngster. His weapon jerked up, covering the victim.

The mule skinner swung his whip, swiftly, expertly.

He could pick a fly from the ear of the off leader. Now the lash snaked out, twined itself around the wrist of the big man, and sent the revolver flying. Yet another moment, and one hundred and ninety pounds of bone and muscle had descended upon the killer from the sky. The fellow went down as though hurled into the earth by a pile driver. He lay motionless, the breath driven out of his body by the shock of the assault.

Lean-loined and agile, Boone was up like a cat. He scooped up the revolver from the ground and whirled, his back against the front wheel of the wagon. For out of the saloon had come men, four or five of them. They had drawn guns—at least, two of them had—and they were moving toward the scene of action. Out of the tail of his eye Boone saw the little man, dragging one leg, vanish behind the wagon.

The bearded man sat up, one side of his face covered with dust. He was still dazed, but anger and annoyance were rising in him. He glared at Boone, ferocious as a tiger with its claws cut. His .44 gone, he was momentarily helpless.

"Who in Mexico are you?" he roared.

The mule whacker answered not the question but the issue: "The kid. You didn't see it."

"What kid?"

"With the dog. In the line of yore fire." Boone's words were directed toward the bearded man, his eyes and his attention toward the newcomers.

They were big, rangy men, hard-eyed and leathery. They wore long drooping moustaches after the fashion of the period.

One of them spoke, harshly, with authority. Beneath the black moustache he had a stiff imperial. His mouth was straight and thin-lipped. "That's right, Curt. You didn't see the kid."

The bearded man rose and took two long steps toward Boone. "Gimme that gun," he demanded.

The young teamster had lived all of his twenty-three years on the frontier where emergencies must be met by instant decision. Already he knew that the man with the imperial was a leader. The breadth of his shoulders, the depth of his chest, the poised confidence of manner were certificates of strength. He alone had not yet drawn a weapon.

"I'll give it to *you*, sir," Boone replied. "Yore friend is some annoyed yet, I expect."

Holding the revolver by the long barrel he handed it to the man selected.

"I'll take that gun, Whip," its owner said roughly.

"Don't burn up the road, Curt," his friend answered. "This young pilgrim is right. You might have hit the kid. He didn't aim to jump you but to save the little fellow. I reckon you'll have to leave him go this time."

"Leave him go? After he lit on me all spraddled out? Gun or no gun, I'll sure take him to a cleaning." Curt moved toward Boone, a trifle heavily. He was a full-bodied man, physically more like the grizzly than the panther. He stopped in front of the teamster.

Young Sibley looked at him quietly, steadily. "I'm not lookin' for trouble, sir," he said. "Sorry I had to drap on you on account of the kid. I figured you wouldn't want to hurt the little fellow."

"I aim to work you over proper," the bearded man announced. "I don't need no gun."

Boone's revolver was on the wagon seat. This was just as well. He was debarred from using it, both because his antagonist was unarmed and because the man's friends would instantly have shot him down if he had drawn a weapon. A crowd was beginning to gather. He heard comments and prophecies. "Curt will sure eat up this pilgrim."—"Y'betcha! If Mr. Mule Skinner allows he's the venomous kypoote, he's due to get unroostered pronto."

The bearded man lashed out at his intended victim. Boone ducked, drove a left to the fellow's cheek, and danced out of range. Curt roared with anger, put down his head, and charged. His heavy arms swung like flails, savagely, wildly, with great power behind the blows. The younger man, lithe as a wildcat, alert to forestall each movement, smothered some of these swings, blocked others, dodged the rest. His timing, his judgment of distance, were perfect. He jolted the bearded man with two slashing lefts and a short-arm uppercut, sidestepped the ensuing rush, and with a powerful right, all the driving power of his weight back of it, landed flush on the chin at precisely the right instant. Caught off balance, the big man went down like a pole-axed steer.

He went down and he stayed down. His body half rolled over in the dust. He made a spasmodic effort to rise, one of his hands clawing the ground for a hold. Then he relaxed and seemed to fall into himself.

For a moment nobody spoke, nobody moved. Curt

French had the reputation of being the best bit of fighting machinery in the new camp. In the current parlance, he could whip his weight in wildcats. So it had been said, and he had given proof in plenty of his prowess. And now an unknown mule skinner, probably a greener who hailed from some whistling post in the desert, had laid him out expertly, with a minimum of effort, and there was not a scratch on the young chap's face to show that he had been in a fight.

An enthusiastic miner slapped his hat against the leg of a dusty pair of trousers. "Never saw the beat of it. Short an' sweet. Sews Curt up in a sack, an' when he's good an' ready, bing goes the sockdolager, an' Curt turns up his toes to the daisies."

"Say, you ain't Paddy Ryan,* are you?" demanded an admiring bartender.

The man who had been called Whip pushed forward and spoke curtly. "What's yore name, young fellow? And where d'you hail from?"

The teamster met his heavy frown steadily. "Boone Sibley. I'm from Texas."

"Well, Texas man, I'm offerin' you advice free gratis. Drive on an' keep right on going. Tucson is a good town. So's Phoenix."

"What's the matter with this town?"

"Not healthy."

"For me, you mean?"

"For you."

The eyes of the two clashed, those of Boone hard

*This was a few months before John L. Sullivan defeated Paddy Ryan for the heavyweight boxing championship of America.

and cold as chilled steel, his opponent's dark and menacing, deep-socketed in a grim, harsh face. It was a drawn battle.

The older man added explanation to his last answer. "For anyone who has done to Curt French what you've done."

"Meanin' there will be a gun play?" Boone asked quietly.

"Don't put words in my mouth, young fellow," the other said stiffly. "Leave it as it lays. Light out. Make tracks. *Vamos.*"

Boone did not say he would take this advice. He did not say he would not. "I'm sure a heap obliged to you," he murmured, with the little drawl that might or might not conceal irony. His glance went around the circle of faces, some curious, some hostile, some frankly admiring. It dropped to the man he had vanquished and took in the fact that the fellow was beginning to stir. Then, unhurriedly, he turned his back, put a foot on the hub of the wheel, and climbed back into the wagon.

"Gidap!" he clucked to the mules.

The long whip snaked out. The tugs straightened as the mules leaned forward. The wagon went crunching down the street.

CHAPTER VI

BOONE MEETS MR. TURLEY

A MAN called on Boone that evening at the Dallas House. He gave his name as Mack Riley. A youngish man, weather-beaten and tanned, his face had written on it marks of the Emerald Isle. He spoke as a Westerner does, with only a trace of accent.

"I come from Mr. Turley," he explained. "He wants to see you. Reckon he feels some obligated to you."

"Never heard of him," Boone answered.

"He's the fellow you kept Curt French from killin' to-day. Curt got him in the leg, so he couldn't come himself. He asked would you come to see him."

"What's he want?"

"I dunno. He's kinda mysterious—lives under his own hat, as you might say. It's not far. He stays in a shack back of the Buffalo Corral."

"What was the trouble between him and this Curt French?"

"Something he put in the paper. He's editor of the *Gold Pocket*. Say, young fellow, I saw the show you put on. You certainly were sailing. You been educated all round, up an' down, over, under, an' between. Either that or else you had nigger luck."

"I expect I was lucky. Tell me about this Curt French, him an' his friends, too."

Across Riley's map-of-Ireland face there flitted an expression that masked expression. His eyes went dead. It was as though he had put on a mask. "What about 'em?" he asked warily.

"Anything about 'em—or all about 'em. I didn't quite *sabe* the game."

"Meanin' just what?" asked Riley cautiously.

"I got an impression—maybe there's nothing to it—that this Curt an' the man he called Whip an' two-three others were kinda in cahoots."

Riley said nothing, in a manner that implied he could say a great deal if he chose.

Boone continued, watching him: "When this Whip fellow told me to throw the bud into my leaders an' keep travellin', I reckoned he was talkin' for his gang as well as for French."

"Me, if I thought so, I'd sure take his advice,'' Riley said in a voice studiously colourless.

"Why?" asked Boone bluntly. "Is this Whip a bad crowd?"

"You'll never get me to say so, young fellow. I told you what I'd do. That's enough."

"You've said too much or too little, Mr. Riley."

"I've said all I aim to say."

"Those other blackbirds that had their guns out, who were they?"

"One was Russ Quinn, brother of Whip. The other was Sing Elder."

"Kinda hang together, do they, them an' this French fellow?" Sibley asked.

"You might say they were friends."

"Got any business?"

"Right now I'm swampin' for Dave Reynolds at the Buffalo."

"I was speakin' of these other gents—the Quinns an' Elder an' French."

"Oh, them! Whip owns the Occidental. Biggest gambling house in town. Sing runs a game for him. They're cousins. Russ is shotgun messenger for the express company."

"An' Mr. French?"

"Curt? Well, I dunno. He bucks the tiger consid'rable. Onct in a while he's lookout at the Occidental."

"A tinhorn?"

"I'm not using that word about him. Not none. An' if I was you I wouldn't either, stranger. You're a likely young fellow, an' you're sure a jim-dandy with yore dukes. You'd do fine in Tucson likely. It's a right lively town, an' the road there is in first-class shape."

"Tucson certainly gets good recommendations from you gentlemen in Tough Nut," Boone said drily. "Any of you ever try that road yore own selves?"

Riley gave up, his patience exhausted. "All right. You're the doctor. Maybe you know best. Maybe nobody is aimin' anyhow to hang yore hide on the corral fence. I thought, you being only a kid, I'd see could I do anything for you. More fool me. You know yore own business, likely."

"I'm much obliged, Mr. Riley," the Texan said in his gentle voice. "But I reckon I'll look around awhile before I move on."

"Suit yoreself," the Irishman said shortly. "What about Turley?"

"I'll see him. Want I should come with you?"

"Better sift around after dark. It's the 'dobe shack just west of the corral. You can't miss it—a one-room house."

Boone did not wait till after dark. He saw no reason why he should. For the present, at least, he meant to stay in Tough Nut. To move about furtively, after dark, avoiding trouble which might never materialize, was not consistent with his temperament. There was no reason why these men should make difficulties for him. The affair with French had been none of his seeking. He had acted instinctively to save the child's life. Afterward he had apologized, had tried to placate the angry ruffian. His associates would probably talk him out of his resentment.

None the less, Boone went prepared for trouble. In a sling under his left arm he carried a Colt's .45 six-shooter, one with a nine-inch barrel. Another, not so long, hung from his belt. He did not expect to have to use them. Still, he wanted to know that they were handy if needed. The point about trouble was that it usually jumped you suddenly when least expected.

The sun was in the west, setting in a crotch of the jagged porphyry mountains. It was still king of the desert, its rays streaming over the silvery sheen of the mesquite. Boone stood a few minutes to watch the spectacle, at the end of a street which stopped abruptly at the rock rim above the valley. The dust, finer than

sand, gave colour to the landscape, an opaline mist that blurred and softened garish details. Already an imperial purple filled the pockets of the hills. Soon, now, that burning lake above, which fired the crags and sent streamers of pink and crimson and orange flaming across the sky, would fade slowly into the deep blue of approaching night.

Boone turned and walked with his long easy stride back to Boot Hill Street, then followed it as far as the Buffalo Corral. His eye picked up the adobe shack described to him by Riley, and two minutes later he was knocking at the door.

It was opened to him by Riley. There were in the cabin a bed, some plain furniture, and a great many books. On the bed lay the wounded man. Against the wall, chair tilted back and one run-down boot heel caught in a rung of it, lounged a curly-headed youth with the rich bloom of health in his cheeks. He was dressed as a cowboy.

Riley did the honours. "Meet Mr. Turley, Mr. Sibley. Shake hands with Mr. Rhodes."

The cowpuncher unhooked his heel, dropped the front legs of the chair to the floor, and got to his feet, all with one swift, lithe motion.

"Known as Dusty Rhodes," he added by way of further introduction. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Sibley. You're right famous already in our li'l' burg."

"News to me, sir," Boone replied. He liked the appearance of this impetuous youth. An open face recommended him, and the promise of buoyant gaiety was prepossessing.

"You couldn't expect to make Curt French look like a plugged nickel without having word of it spread like a prairie fire. He's been the big wind pudding here for quite some time."

"Meanin' that he's a false alarm?"

"No, sirree. He's there both ways from the ace. In strict confidence, he's a dirty flop-eared wolf, but I reckon he'll back his own bluffs."

The man on the bed spoke. "I have to thank you, Mr. Sibley, for saving my life to-day." His voice held a clipped precise accent. He tugged nervously at his short, bristly moustache. Boone was to learn later that this was an habitual gesture with him. It arose from nervousness, from an inner conviction that he was quite unfitted to cope with the wild frontier life into which some malign fate had thrust him.

"That's all right," young Sibley said. The subject embarrassed him, though no sign of this showed in his immobile face. "Fact is, I was thinkin' of the kid. Mothers hadn't ought to let their babies go maverickin' off alone."

"Not much to you, perhaps, but a good deal to me," the little editor replied, referring to what was in his mind rather than to what Boone had said. A muscular spasm of reminiscent fear contorted for a moment his face. "The ruffian meant to murder me, and, but for the grace of God and your bravery, I would now be a dead man," he concluded solemnly.

"There's a right few slips between what a feller figures an' what he makes out to get done. Curt aimed to bump you off like I aimed onct to bring to my wickiup

for keeps a li'l' lady in the San Simon, only my plans got kinda disarranged when she eloped with a bald-headed old donker who had four kids an' a cow ranch. You cain't always sometimes most generally tell. Lady Luck is liable to be sittin' into the game," the cowboy suggested with philosophic flippancy.

"It wasn't luck this time. It was God's providence that I'm so little injured," Turley corrected. "He held the hand of the slayer because my work is not yet done. It is about that I want to see you, Mr. Sibley."

Boone said nothing. Evidently the editor had some proposition to make. The Texan had a capacity for silence. He could wait while another did the talking. It was an asset in the Southwest to be a man of few words, especially when those few were decisive.

"The Lord chose you as His instrument. I take it as a sign that we are to be associated."

"How?" asked Boone.

He was not favourably impressed. Turley was not his kind of man. A feeling of distaste, almost of disgust, rose in him. He had seen the editor running for his life, in a panic of raw fear, the manhood in him dissolved in quick terror. Now he was talking religious cant like a preacher. In Boone's code, inherited from his environment, the one essential virtue was courage. A man might be good. He might be bad. Without nerve he was negligible, not worth the powder to blow him up. Measured by this test, Turley failed to pass. It looked now as though he were a hypocrite, to boot.

Turley settled his shoulders nervously before he began to talk. "You are a stranger, Mr. Sibley. I do not know

you, nor do you know me. What I have to say will be spoken by one who has the best interest of the community at heart. I am editor of the local newspaper, the *Gold Pocket*. That paper has a duty to perform to Cochise County. It must stand for law and order, for advancing civilization. Do you agree with me?"

"I'm listenin'," Boone said. "You're talkin'."

"I take it that you have had a reasonable amount of schooling, Mr. Sibley, from the standpoint of the Southwest."

"Correct, sir."

"This community stands at the crossroads. It is infested by gunmen, gamblers, and criminals. These are largely outnumbered by honest citizens who stand aside and let the ruffians have their way. The *Gold Pocket* must be the organ of righteousness. It must be the centre around which can rally all those who believe in law enforcement. Mr. Sibley, I want to enlist you in that cause."

The editor's voice had become a little shrill, oratorical with excitement. Boone looked at him with a wooden face. Again he asked, "How?"

"As assistant to me in editing the paper."

The Texan's answer was immediate. "No, thank you."

"Don't make up your mind precipitately," the editor urged. "Think it over."

"Not necessary. Yore proposition doesn't interest me."

"At least leave it open. You do not have to say 'No' to-day."

"I can't leave open what never was open. I'm not a politician. I don't care who is sheriff. Why come to me? I never was inside a newspaper office."

"That doesn't matter." The editor sat up, his black eyes shining. "This is a fight, Mr. Sibley. I have put my hand to the plough. I can't turn back. What I need is a fearless man to back me up in my fight for good."

"Maybe it's yore fight. It's not mine."

"It is yours as much as mine. It is every honest decent citizen's business to stand up for what is right."

"Dusty Rhodes to bat," announced the owner of the name genially. "What's eatin' Mr. Turley is that the bridle's off this burg an' she's kickin' up her heels every jump of the road. He gets all het up about it. Give us time, I say. Tough Nut is only a kid yet." He rose from the chair, stretched himself, and announced that he was going to waltz up town to the Can-Can for grub. "It's a good two-bit restaurant, Mr. Sibley. Better come along an' feed yore face."

"Reckon I will," assented the Texan.

"What I object to," the editor said by way of correction, "is cold-blooded murder on our city streets, and robbery under arms, and intimidation of justice, and corruption of officials. As an American citizen——"

"As an American citizen," interrupted Riley, "you are entitled to squawk, an' you've done right considerable of it. If you had any horse sense, carryin' that pill in yore leg, you'd know when to quit. If I was you I'd sure turn my back on that plough you was so eloquentious about. I tell you straight you ain't got a lick of sense if you don't shut yore trap. I don't want to be listenin' to

nice words from the preacher about you. Now I've said all I'm gonna say, to you an' this young fellow both. I aim to live long in the land myself, an' I onct knew a fellow got to be 'most a hundred by mindin' his own business."

"Amen!" agreed young Rhodes in his best mourners'-bench voice. "Meanwhile, it's me for the Can-Can to eat one of Charlie's steaks smothered in onions."

The two young men walked up town together.

"So you reckon you don't want to be an editor," Rhodes said, by way of getting his companion's opinion.

"Funniest proposition ever put up to me," Boone responded. "How come he to figure I might throw in with him? What's his game, anyhow?"

"Well, sir, that's right queer. He ain't got any game, except he thinks it's his duty to bawl out the Quinn outfit an' any others ridin' crooked trails. Course, they'll bump him off one of these days. He knows it, too. Scared to death, the li'l' prune is, but stickin' right to the saddle."

"Why? What's the use?" asked Boone, puzzled.

Dusty looked at him, grinning slightly. "Leavin' our beautiful city to-night, Mr. Sibley?"

"No, I reckon not."

"Soon?"

"Thought I'd look around awhile. Were you aimin' to tell me that Tucson is a right lively town where I'd probably do well?"

"No, sir. But you got yore answer. You cain't see why old man Turley stays here, but you're aimin' to stay yore own self."

"Not the same. First off, I haven't been objecting to the bridle being off the town."

"No," agreed the cowboy drily, "you jest jumped Curt French when he hadn't done a thing to you, an' that ain't supposed to be safer than throwin' a match into a keg of powder."

"An' second, if this Curt French is sore at me—well, I expect I'll be present when the band begins to play. But Turley he'll wilt right off the earth."

"Sure he will."

"He's got no more nerve than a brush rabbit."

"That's whatever. He's plumb scared stiff half the time."

"Then why don't he light out—cut dirt for Boston, or wherever he comes from?"

"Because he's got sand in his craw—guts."

"You just said——"

"I said the goose quills run up an' down his spine every time he sees a bad man. Now I say he's the gamest bird I ever raised. You an' me—he's got us backed off the map for sand. If I was half as scared as he is, I'd be in New Mexico by now an' still travellin'. No, sir. I take off my hat to him."

"I didn't cotton to him much myself."

"You wouldn't—not at first. He don't know sic' 'em about this border country. Came out for his health. Got all sorts of funny notions. He aims to gentle us an' get us saddle broke to nice ladylike ways. Yet I'll be doggoned if I don't like the li'l' cuss—an' respect him. He's gonna play out his hand to a finish."

"Why don't he get you to back his play?" Boone asked.

Dusty suspected sarcasm in the question, but he grinned cheerfully. "Me? Why, I ain't bought any chips in this game. I'm one of these here innocent bystanders. Come to that, I do a li'l' hellin' around my own self, onct in a while."

Boone nodded. He could believe that.

The cowboy added another reason.

' An' I don't aim to take up a residence in Boot Hill if I can help it. I don't claim everything's right in this town. It ain't. But nobody elected me to read the riot act to the bad actors."

"Meanin' the Quinn gang?"

"I'm naming no names. Here's Charlie's place. We'll sashay in an' feed us at his chuck wagon." He hung on the threshold a moment to add a word to what he had said. "But Whip an' Russ ain't a bad crowd, stranger. There's a heap worse than them in this man's town."

"An' French—have you got a gilt-edged testimonial framed up for him, too?" Boone asked.

The cowboy grinned. "S-sh! Hush yore fool mouth."

CHAPTER VII

INDIRECT DISCOURSE

A THIN old man, toothless, sat in the Can-Can eating a plate of flapjacks. Dusty Rhodes hailed him.

"How you makin' it, Dad?"

"Fat like a match. How's yore own corporosity sagasuate?"

"I'm ridin' high, wide, an' handsome."

"Hmp! You sayin' it don't mean a thing to me. You got no ambition—none of you young riders. Give you a saddle, a quirt, spurs, a bronc, a forty-dollar job, an' onct in a while God send Sunday, an' you don't ask another thing."

"Meet Mr. Sibley," the cowboy said. "Mr. Sibley, shake hands with Mobeetie Bill. Don't ask me what his onct name was. All I know is he lit in Cochise three jumps ahead of a posse."

"Nothin' to that, Mr. Sibley," the old man corrected. "Fact is, I skinned a jerk-line string when I fust come."

"I been told he hit Texas when the Palo Duro wasn't a hole in the ground yet. No tellin' how old he is. Mebbe a hundred. Don't you believe anything this old Hassayampa* tells you, Mr. Sibley. By the way, Dad, Mr. Sibley is from yore own rangé."

*The legend is that anyone drinking of the waters of the Hassayampa River cannot afterward tell the truth.

"Not exactly, if you hail from the Panhandle," Boone said. "I come from the Brazos."

"Sit down, Texas man," the old-timer invited. To the slant-eyed waiter he gave orders. "Another stack of chips. An' wait on these gents, Charlie."

They sat down, ordered, ate. Casual conversation flowed on. For the most part Boone listened. Mobeetie Bill had been a buffalo hunter. He had, in his own words, "tooken the hides off'n a heap of them." Before that he had served with the Confederate army, and prior to that with General Sam Houston. He had known the Southwest many years before barb wire had come in to tame it.

"Yes, sir, them was the days," he said reminiscently. "There was mighty few cutbacks in the herd when I fust come to Texas. Clever folks, most of 'em. Course, there was trouble, lots of it. If you was anyways hostile, you could always be accommodated. At El Paso there usta be a cottonwood at the head of a street where folks grew personal. They nailed their opinions of each other on it. Anse Mills posted three citizens as liars. That was sure fightin' talk then. Dallas Studenmire stuck there a list of bad men he aimed to kill pronto if they didn't light out sudden. He bumped off three-four to show good faith, an' the rest said 'Good-bye, El Paso.' Times ain't like they was. Folks either. Me, I'm nothin' but a stove-up old donker."

"This country is wild enough for me right now," Rhodes said. "Four of us was jumped by 'pachies last year. If it's shootin's you are pinin' for, why, I expect Tough Nut could accommodate you."

"Hmp! Boy, you're a kid hardly outa yore cradle. You brag about yore Quinns an' yore Curt French. Say, if they had bumped into John Wesley Hardin when he was going good, or even Clay Allison, our Texas killers would sure have made 'em climb a tree."

Boone observed that Rhodes looked around quickly to make sure nobody else had come into the restaurant. "I ain't arguing with you, Dad. All I say is that when I meet the gents referred to I'm always real polite." He had, even in making this innocuous remark, lowered his voice.

"Why, someone was tellin' me on the street that some pilgrim from back East beat up yore Curt French this very damned day," Dad said belligerently.

"No need to shout it, Dad," the cowboy warned. "Old as you are, you might annoy Curt considerable if he heard you. In which case, he'd take it outa either you or me or both of us. But since you're on the subject, it wasn't any pilgrim from the East but this Texas brother of yores who mixed it with Curt to-day."

Mobeetie Bill's eyes glistened. "Son, you'll do to take along, looks like. But, boy, pack yore hogleg wherever you go, or you'll sure sleep in smoke. Hell coughed up this fellow Curt French. He's a sure enough killer, an' he trails with a bad bunch."

"You're certainly gabby to-day, Dad," Rhodes protested mildly. "A young fellow like you had ought to learn to keep his trap shut."

The old-timer paid no attention to the cowboy. He addressed himself to his fellow Texan. "If you're a false alarm you better cut dirt *pronto*."

"For Tucson?" Boone asked gravely.

Dusty grinned. "Mr. Sibley has been told two-three times already that Tucson is a right good town, an' the wagon tracks are plain headin' thataway."

"Correct," agreed the old buffalo hunter. "That's good advice, Texas man, an' it don't cost a cent Mex."

"Good advice for anyone that wants to take it," amended Boone.

Mobeetie Bill looked into his cool flinty eyes.

"Correct once more. Good for anyone but a fightin' fool, an' maybe for him, too. If I get this Curt French right, he'll aim to make Tough Nut hotter 'n Hades with the blower on for you. He'll likely get lit up with tarantula juice an' go gunnin' with a pair of sixshooters. Like enough he'll take two-three Quinns along when he starts to collect."

"Cheerful news," commented the young Texan. "He seems to be some lobo wolf."

"Prob'ly you could get a job freightin' up Prescott way, thereby throwin' two stones at one bird."

"Right now I'll throw my stones, if any, at birds in Tough Nut. For a day or two, anyhow, while I look around."

Mobeetie Bill let out a soft-pedalled version of the old Rebel yell. "You're shoutin', boy. That's the way folks talked in the good old days. Make this tinhorn climb a tree."

Rhodes spoke quickly, in a low voice: "*Chieto, compadre!*"

Men passed the window of the restaurant. A moment later they came in, two of them. Instantly Boone recog-

nized them as two of the men who had been with French at the time of his difficulty with the gambler. They took seats at a small table in a corner of the room. As they moved across the floor the Texan saw again that they were big and rangy. An arrogant self-confidence rode their manner.

"Brad Prouty an' Russ Quinn," murmured Rhodes.

The buffalo hunter bridged any possible silence the entry of the newcomers might have made. His voice flowed on as though he had been in the midst of narrative.

". . . made camp in a grove of cottonwoods on White Deer creek that night. I rec'lect I was mixin' up a batch of cush* when a fellow rode up with his horse in a lather. The Cheyennes were swarmin' over the country, he claimed. They had burned his ranch, an' he had jest saved his hide. Well, sir, we headed for 'Dobe Walls an' got there right after the big fight Billy Dixon an' the other boys had there with about a thousand Injuns. That's how clost I come to being in the 'Dobe Walls battle."

"Was you in the War of 1812, Dad?" asked Rhodes with innocent malice.

The old man shook a fleshless fist at him. "I ain't so old but what I could take you to a cleanin' right now, boy," he boasted. "Trouble with you young sprouts is you never was wore to a frazzle with a hickory limb when you needed it most."

Dusty slapped his thigh with a brown hand. "Dawged

*Cush was made of soaked corn bread and biscuit, stirred together and fried in bacon grease.

if I don't believe you'd climb my frame for four bits," he chuckled.

"Make it two bits. Make it a plug of tobacco," Dad cackled with a toothless grin.

Quinn and Prouty ordered supper and ate. Russ, facing Boone, said something to his companion in a low voice. Brad turned and stared at Sibley. The young Texan, apparently absorbed in what his friends were saying, endured the look without any evidence that he knew he was the object of attention.

"Curt's right. Population of this town too promiscuous," Russ said, not troubling to lower his voice.

"That's whatever, Russ. Ought to be thinned out."

"Good thing if some emigrated. Good for the town. Good for them." Through narrowed lids slits of eyes watched Boone. "If I was a friend of some of these pilgrims, I'd tell 'em to hive off for other parts—kinda ease outa the scenery, as you might say."

Making notes of these men without seeming to see them, Boone took in the lean shoulders, muscular and broad, of Russell Quinn, his close-clamped jaw, a certain catlike litheness in the carriage of his body. Brad Prouty was heavier and shorter of build, a hairier man. His mouth was a thin, cruel line below the drooping moustache. It might be guessed that Brad was of a sullen disposition, given to the prompt assertion of what he considered his rights.

"Yep, slap a saddle on a broomtail an' light out. I'd sure call that good medicine." This from Prouty.

Quinn took up the refrain: "Sometimes a guy has a li'l' luck an' presses it too far. I've seen that happen

seve-re-al times. Don't know when to lay down a hand. Boot Hill for them right soon. Nobody's fault but their own."

Into this antiphony Boone interjected a remark, addressed apparently to Mobeetie Bill, in an even, level voice.

"Yes, like I was sayin', I like yore town. Reckon I'll camp here awhile. Lots of work, an' folks seem friendly an' sociable."

The old hunter strangled a snort. "Well, they are an' they ain't. Don't you bank on that good feelin' too much."

"Oh, I'll take it as it comes," Boone answered carelessly.

It occurred to Mobeetie Bill, looking at this tall, lean young man, with cool, sardonic blue-gray eyes in the sunburned face, that he was competent to look after himself.

"If you stay, it's on yore own responsibility," Dusty Rhodes chipped in. The cowboy's eyes were shining. This byplay took his fancy. If the odds had not been so great, he would have been willing to take a long-shot bet on Sibley's chances.

"Well, yes," drawled Boone. "I eat an' sleep an' live on my own responsibility. Fact is, I've been hittin' too fast a clip. I kinda want to rest awhile in a nice, quiet, peaceable town like this. Two churches here already, an' another headin' this way, they say. Nice li'l' schoolhouse on Prospect Street. First-class climate. Good live newspaper."

It was Russ who took up the refrain on the part of

the other table. "That's right, come to think of it, nobody been buried in Boot Hill for a week. Liable to be someone soon—some guy who blows in an' wants to show he's a bad man from Bitter Creek. Well, here's hopin'. Shove the salt thisaway, Brad."

"So a quiet young fellow like me, trying to get along, lookin' for no trouble an' expectin' none, had orta do well here," Boone went on placidly.

What Dusty Rhodes thought was, "You durned ol' horn toad, you sure have got sand in your craw." What he said was, "I can get you a job on a ranch in the Chiricahuas, above the San Simon, forty dollars per if you're a top hand with a rope."

"Maybe I'll take you up later. No rush. I reckon the cows will calve in the spring, same as usual," Boone said nonchalantly.

"I'll be rockin' along thataway in a day or two. Like to have yore company," Rhodes insisted.

"Oh, well, we'll see."

Dusty Rhodes paid the bill, insisting that it was his treat. His guests reached for their hats and sauntered out.

Russ Quinn spoke a word as the cowboy was leaving. "Dusty." Rhodes turned and went back to the table. A minute later he joined Sibley and the old buffalo hunter outside.

"What'd he want?" asked Mobeetie Bill.

"Wanted I should get this yere durn fool pilgrim outa the neighbourhood before Curt qualified him for his private graveyard."

"Kind of him," Boone said with mild sarcasm.

Dusty had his own point of view. "Russ is no crazy killer. Course, he'll gun a guy if he has to, but he's not lookin' for a chance. I reckon he'd like to see you light out for yore own sake."

They walked along the roaring street. Already it was filled with lusty, good-natured life. Men jostled each other as they crowded in and out of the gambling halls. Sunburned cowboys, sallow miners, cold-eyed tinhorns, dusty freighters, and prosperous merchants were out for amusement. Inside the variety halls and the saloons, gaudily dressed women drank with the customers and offered their smiles to prospective clients. But outside none of the weaker sex showed themselves on Apache Street. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief: they crowded one another impartially in democratic simplicity. One was as good as another. All were embryonic millionaires, sure that the blind goddess Luck would strike them soon.

Whatever else it was, Tough Nut was a man's town.

CHAPTER VIII

TROUBLE IN THE HILLS

BOONE was not looking for trouble, but he was warily ready for it. He and his companions wandered through Jefford's and the Golden Eagle. They took a flyer at the wheel in Dolan's Palace. They watched a stud game running at the Last Chance.

More than one man recognized Boone and out of the corner of his mouth murmured something to his nearest neighbour. The Texan's face was impassive, his manner indifferent. He seemed to be negligently at ease. But his cool eyes carried to him all the information they could gather. They searched out the personnel of every crowd. When swing doors were pushed open, they were aware of who entered. Each gambler's face was noted and dismissed.

His business was to show himself in public, briefly, at several places, to put at rest any question of his being in hiding. This was not bravado. It was an insurance policy, by no means bulletproof, against attack. For if Curt French suspected that Boone was afraid of him he would certainly begin burning powder when they met.

The Texan did not invite a challenge. He stayed away from the Occidental, where French was most likely to be found. A visit to Whip Quinn's place at present would

be considered in the nature of a defiance, and Boone had no desire to stir up the wild animals. There was always a possibility, though from what he heard about Curt he judged it slight, that if he did not meet the man too soon the fellow's simmering wrath might not explode. The Quinns might talk him out of an attempt at reprisal.

It was still early, as Tough Nut judged time, when Boone went back to his room at the Dallas House. He rolled and smoked a cigarette meditatively. Certainly, it was hard luck that within five minutes of his arrival in town he had made an enemy of a bad hombre like Curt French and had fallen tentatively into disfavour with the Quinns. They would be a hard combination to buck against. He could not run away. That was not consistent with his code. But he would stand back and sidestep trouble unless it was forced on him.

He went to bed and was asleep within five minutes.

Sunlight was streaming into the room when he awoke. He dressed, breakfasted, and walked the quiet streets as he went about his business of feeding the team and disposing of the supplies he had brought to the camp. French was a night owl, as gamblers are, and the chances were that he would not be seen till afternoon. None the less, Boone went cautiously. The fellow might surprise him.

Noon passed. The sun moved westward and sank lower. Twice Boone saw some of the Quinn crowd. Once Whip and Brad, at a distance, came down Apache Street and disappeared into the Occidental. Later, he passed Russ and another big dark man standing on a

street corner. Someone spoke to the second man, calling him Sing.

Russ looked bleakly at Boone. "Still here?" he said.

"Still here," Boone answered curtly.

Just before supper time Dusty Rhodes came to Boone with news. "I saw Doc Peters li'l' while ago. Whaja think? Curt's down with the measles."

"Measles?"

"Yep." The cowboy grinned. "Got 'em bad. He's in bed an' liable to stay there three-four days. Kinda funny, a big elephant like Curt gettin' a kid disease like the measles."

For Boone this was good news, unless it was a trap to throw him off his guard.

"What kind of a fellow is this Doc Peters? Stand in with the Quinn gang, does he?"

"No, sir. He's a good doctor, educated 'way up, an' he's straight as a string. Anyone will tell you he's a good citizen."

"Find out from him how sick French is, will you?"

"Bet yore boots. Say, what about that Chiricahua proposition we was talkin' about. No use stickin' around waitin' for Curt to get well enough to bump you off. I'm for being accommodatin', but there's sure a limit."

"I'll throw in with you if you'll wait two-three days."

Dusty hesitated. "Looky here, fellow, I like yore style. But let's git down to cases. The Quinns are our friends—us fellows up in the hills. Kinda mutual give an' take. 'Nough said. I cain't plumb throw 'em down. I'm figurin' to get you outa town before the earthquake."

"Suits me fine," agreed Boone, smiling. "But I've got business here for a coupla days. After that I'm with you."

"You don't figure on havin' a rumpus with any of the Quinns?" the cowboy asked cautiously.

"Not none, unless some of 'em ride me."

"All right," conceded Dusty reluctantly. "But why wait two days? You want to show you ain't scared, I reckon."

"That's about it. Just like a kid," Boone admitted. But he knew that his reason ran deeper than vanity. He was staying a reasonable time partly out of self-respect, partly because he knew that a man in trouble is always safer if he puts on a bold front.

Dusty took occasion to drop around to the Occidental for a word with its owner. He found Whip Quinn making measurements with a carpenter for an addition of an ell at the rear of the house to enlarge its capacity.

The cowpuncher had come for a definite purpose, but he stood around rather awkwardly trying to find a way to make what he was about to say sound casual.

Whip anticipated him. "Hear you've found a new friend, Dusty."

The cowboy met the hard stare of the gambler. "Looks thataway," he admitted, somewhat disconcerted. "I kinda like the guy. It was about him I wanted to speak to you."

"I'm listenin'," Whip said briefly.

"Sibley is not lookin' for trouble. It was sorta wished on him."

"I was there at the time. Not necessary to explain it to me."

"That's right," agreed Rhodes. "Well, all I wanted to say was that he's leavin' for the hills right soon."

"When?"

"In a day or so. He's got some business to finish."

"Did he ask you to tell me that?"

"No-o, he didn't."

"Well, if he's not huntin' trouble he'd better light out before Curt is around again. You can tell him that from me."

The cowboy did not carry this message. He was afraid it might have the opposite of the desired effect. Sibley would not let himself be run out of town or driven out by fear of consequences.

Boone sold his team and bought a cow pony. His saddle he had brought with him in the wagon. When at last the two were fairly on the road, Dusty took a deep breath of relief. He was reckless enough himself and had come out of more than one scrape during which guns had blazed. But he liked this Texan, and he was convinced that if Boone stayed in town it would be only a few days until Curt French would force the issue and the Quinns would be drawn in. Under which circumstances his new friend would not have a rabbit's chance.

They rode through the grama grass into the golden dawn of the desert. Before them were the jig-saw mountains, bare and brown. In that uncertain light they had a curious papier-mâché effect, as though they had been built for stage scenery.

The riders descended into a valley blue and pink with

alfilaria. The season was spring. There had been plenty of winter rain, and the country bloomed. The brilliant flowers of the cacti were all about them; the prickly pear and the ocotillo in scarlet bloom, the sahuaro great candelabra lighted, as it were, with yellow flame. Here and there in the chaparral were florescent buckthorn and manzanita.

They came upon a pair of burros picketed out, and close to them the camp of a pair of prospectors. The old fellows were typical desert rats, unshaven, ragged, and dust-grimed.

Young Rhodes gave a shout. "Look who we've jumped this glad mo'ning—old Toughfoot Bozeman an' Hassayampa Pete. What do you-all gravel scratchers figure on findin' down in the flats here?"

The eyes of one of the old-timers twinkled. "'Lowed to run acrost a stray jackass or two, maybe."

His partner took the question more seriously. "We been in the Chiricahuas lookin' around. Nothin' there. We're headin' for the Dragoons. You better quit hellin' around an' go to prospectin' yore own self, young fellow."

"Meet Mr. Sibley, from Texas, gents. No, I ain't got the patience to spend all my time diggin' graveyards for my hopes. Me, I'll stick to cows."

"Yore own or someone else's?" Pete asked innocently. Then, lest this sounded too pointed, he added: "You young galoots got jest about brains enough to head off a steer high-tailin' acrost the desert. Well, go to it, boy. I'll buy you a ranch when we've done made our strike."

The two young men left the prospectors packing their outfit.

"We'll get outa the flats soon," Dusty promised.

Beyond the valley they climbed into the foothills and jogged along for hours, gradually working higher as the trail wound in and out of arroyos and small cañons. On the sleepy shoulder of a ridge spur they unsaddled to rest their horses.

Dusty shot a rattlesnake.

"First I've seen this year," he said. "Almost stepped on it as I come round that niggerhead."

They lay down and chatted disjointedly. Their talk was of the common subjects that interested Arizona. They mentioned the rains and the good grass and how fat cattle were. They wondered whether the Apaches would soon break out again. Both of them knew that Cochise County was the home of scores of rustlers who were engaged in running stock across the border from Mexico. But that was a subject best not discussed by strangers, and these two young men were scarcely more than that. All that Boone knew of his companion was that he seemed a friendly, likable youth. No doubt he was a wild buckaroo. Left an orphan at an early age, he had scrambled up without training or family traditions. What his reaction toward honesty might be, Boone did not know. But the Texan noted that Dusty gave no details of his manner of life. He did not name his employer, if he had one; nor did he say anything of a ranch and brand of his own.

There were few cattle ranches and these as yet not well stocked. The Mexican line was close, and beyond

it were the haciendas of señores rich in land and cattle. It was an easy though a risky undertaking to slip across to Sonora, round up a bunch of cows, and drive them into Arizona in the dark of the moon. The ranchers on the San Pedro and the Sulphur Springs valley asked few questions as to length of ownership. They "bought at a whack-up" and were glad to stock their range at a low price. If the local market was glutted, the rustlers hid the cattle in small mountain parks, changed the brands, and drove a herd to some of the government posts which needed beef for the Indians on reservations.

The two young men resaddled and took up again the trail for the uplands. They were now in a rough country. The arroyos had become gulches, the hills mountains. The cholla and palo verde had given place to scrub pine and juniper. The riders followed a tortuous path. They climbed stiff shale ascents and dropped down precipitous pitches.

To them drifted the sound of a shot, faint and far.

"Box Cañon over thataway," explained Dusty. "Back of it the McLennon ranch."

Another shot came to them, and after it the popping of four or five more explosions, much as though someone were setting off firecrackers.

The riders drew up to listen. For a few moments there was silence, then again another cracker went "plop!" Presently, like a muffled echo of it, a duller report reached their ears.

Dusty looked at his companion. "Trouble, sounds like. Rifles an' sixshooters both. We better head thataway."

The Texan nodded. Neither of them said anything about the need for caution, but instinctively they left the draw they were ascending and put their horses to the steep hillside. Both wanted to see as soon as possible those who were shooting. There was a good deal less chance of riding into a trap from a hilltop than from a gulch.

While they were still climbing to the ridge, other shots sounded. These were louder than the others. Boone judged that the riflemen were moving rapidly nearer. Oddly enough, both men knew that what they heard was not the exuberance of youth making a noise to express itself. This firing meant battle, the spit of deadly bullets, the sinister whistle of Death screaming on its way. How they knew it, neither could have told; perhaps by some sixth sense given to those who tread wild and dangerous trails.

From the summit they looked down on a hill pocket of mesquite terminating in a rocky wall. Three men lay crouched in the brush behind such shelter as they could find. Fifty yards in front of them was another. His body lay huddled face down where he had fallen.

The men were trapped. That was clear enough. But even from the height where Boone stood, it took him some seconds to find any of the assailants. They, too, had taken such cover as the draw afforded. Presently the sun glinted on the barrel of a rifle, though no man was visible behind it. A puff of smoke some distance to the right showed him where another squatted. His eyes picked out a third behind the trunk of a twisted mesquite. There were others, of course, hidden in the cha-

parral. In the distance a bunch of cattle could be seen grazing.

"Our boys," Dusty cried, his voice shrill from excitement. "They've got one of 'em."

Already he was sliding from the saddle, rifle in hand. Boone followed his example and took refuge behind a low broad oak. But the Texan did not imitate him in his next move. For Dusty, from behind another live oak, took careful aim and fired at the man back of the twisted mesquite.

The man jumped up and ran for the shelter of a wash. Boone made a discovery. He was a Mexican in tight trousers and big sombrero.

There was quick, excited speech. A second man broke for the wash, and a bullet sang past him as he scudded for safety. Then Boone saw two men moving cautiously through the brush. They, too, were heading for the wash. All of them were Mexicans.

"We've got 'em runnin'," Dusty shouted to those below.

A moment later a compact group of men, on horseback, clambered out of the wash, on the far side, and rode away at a gallop. They broke formation, scattered, and circled the cattle. Dusty let out an exultant "Hi-yi!"

CHAPTER IX

RUSTLERS

EXCEPT as to details, the situation explained itself to Boone. It told its own story without words. These cowboys in the hill pocket below were rustlers. They had driven this bunch of cattle across the line and had almost reached safety. But for once the Mexican vaqueros had outgeneralled them. They had pursued, cut off the cowboys, killed one of them, and recaptured their stock. Already the victors were hustling the tired herd along the back trail.

The arrival of Dusty Rhodes had been opportune. It was his shot from the bluff that had startled the attackers. They had settled down to wipe out the rustlers, but the sound of reinforcements had frightened them. They were in the enemy's country and might in turn be caught in a trap. Hence, their immediate withdrawal.

Boone counted seven of the vaqueros, and he was not sure that he had not missed one or two. They had ridden bunched, and after they had spread to gather the herd the riders were so mixed with the cattle that it was not easy to distinguish them.

There was a puff of smoke, and an instant later the sound of a shot. Boone could see now that someone had ridden out to a little spur almost in front of the

moving mass of animals. One of the Mexicans had fired at him. Too late the man turned to escape. A second shot brought down his horse. He picked himself up and ran for a clump of firs. Bullets plopped at him as he fled along the spur.

He was a slim, lithe young fellow, and he ran fast. One of the vaqueros spurred his horse forward to cut off the retreat.

"They've got him," Dusty cried in excitement. "They've sure got him. What a fool trick to show himself!"

The runner stopped, cut off from the timber. He dragged out a revolver or a pistol and fired. He had aimed at the Mexican who barred his flight.

The sequel was surprising. From his horse the vaquero leaped and swept his sombrero almost to the ground in a raffish bow. What he said was indistinguishable, but there was apparently an exchange of words. Another rider cantered up. The first vaquero led his horse toward the cornered man. There was more talk. The Mexicans urged something at which the other demurred. With a swift gesture, one of them snatched the weapon from their captive. Reluctantly, so it seemed, the latter drew nearer the bronco. His foot found the stirrup, and with one lithe motion he was astride the horse of the second rider, sitting behind the vaquero.

"They're takin' him along," Dusty cried. "Why, by golly? Howcome they didn't pump him full of lead an' leave him lay?"

Before he had finished speaking, he knew why. The

hat of the prisoner had fallen off when the horse had gone down. Now, as the vaquero gave his mount the spur, a flag of red hair streamed out in the breeze. The captive was a woman—more than that, a young and lissom one.

"Who is she?" asked Boone.

"Til McLennon, I reckon. We better move down to where the other boys are at."

They found a break in the bluff where their horses could pick a way down by sliding rather than walking.

The men below were grouped around the one who had been killed. A pockmarked man turned to Dusty as he approached.

"They done got Bill. Lucky for us you drifted along, prob'ly. The greasers got scared an' lit out."

Dusty looked down with awe at the dead rustler. He had known him for a year and more as a gay and carefree boy. "Sure tough," he said, his voice grave. He swallowed a lump in his throat before he went on. "Meet Mr. Sibley, boys. This is Sandy Joe. Shake hands with Tom Tracy an' Sid Edwards."

The invitation to shake hands was a figurative and not a literal one. They wasted no time in formalities, but fell at once into a discussion of ways and means. All of them had seen the Mexicans pick up the girl. She must, of course, be rescued. They did not need to argue about that. The question was how.

"They'll head through Box Cañon. That's where they laid for us an' jumped us," Edwards said. "They can't follow that bunch of cows an' make their getaway. We got time enough." He was a squat, heavy-set man with

bowed legs, the oldest of the party. By common consent, he took command. "Can't stop to bury Bill now. Have to wait for that. Sandy, you light out for the McLennon place an' pass the word to Hugh about his sister. Tell him to bring whoever is handy an' meet us at Galeyville. He'll come hotfoot. The rest of us will trail these birds till we're through the cañon."

Boone fell in between Edwards and Dusty Rhodes.

"We'll need fresh horses," Dusty said. "We been on ours all day, an' yores look plumb wore out."

"Pick up plenty at Galeyville," Edwards said. "Two-three of us will stay right behind the greasers whilst the rest round up broncs for the outfit."

"Question is, can we get at 'em to settle their hash before night." Dusty looked at the westering sun. "We don't want to leave Til with 'em all night. She'd sure think we was a nice lot of cautious guys. Hadn't we better bust right into the bunch an' give 'em billy-be-damn?"

"No sense to that. They won't hurt Miss Tillie any, I don't reckon. They collected her as a kinda hostage, likely."

"I don't care what they collected her for," Dusty snapped out. "You can bet yore boots they ain't a-goin' to keep her long as I'm sound enough to tote a gun."

"Hold yore horses, boy. Who is figurin' on them keepin' her? But tell me how we can take her away without pumpin' lead right near where she's at. No, we gotta use strategy."

"Beats me what Til was doing there, anyhow," Dusty went on. "Howcome she on that doggone ridge right

then, an' whyfor did she ride out so's they could see her?"

"Hmp!" This contribution came from the man called Tracy. He was a hard-faced citizen with shifty eyes and a mean, thin-lipped mouth. The tone of the exclamation seemed to suggest a good deal that might as well be left unsaid.

"What you gruntin' at, Tom?" challenged Dusty.

The other cowboy drawled his answer out insultingly. "Thought you claimed to know that gal right well. She's liable to be any place any time, particularly if it's where she hadn't ought to be."

Indignantly Dusty denied it. "She's a right fine young lady. Course, she clicks her heels some. Why shouldn't she when she's the prettiest thing in Cochise? Me, I like a gal whose eyes flash—one who has got a will of her own."

"I've seen guys before that liked to be tromped down like a door mat," jeered Tracy.

Edwards interfered. He did not like the man's manner. In the hill country of the frontier, it was not customary to speak of women except with respect.

"That'll be enough, Tom," he said with finality.

Boone guessed that there was something personal back of this interchange between Dusty and Tom Tracy. It was possible they had clashed about the young lady, or, for that matter, on some other subject. Tracy's fling at her might have been made merely to irritate young Rhodes.

The Texan rode beside the cowboys with a mental reservation. He would go as far as any man to rescue an

American woman captured by Mexicans, and that meant to the limit of endurance, as long as he could ride or stand or fight. That was not any distinction in the border land. It was in the code, was expected of every man. But there was another aspect to the situation. These men, with the possible exception of Rhodes, at least, were rustlers caught in the act. If the question came to issue, he would make it clear that he was joining them to help rescue the young lady and not to get back the cattle.

Boone was no prig. He held the ideas of his class in those times regarding rustling stock from the Mexicans. In the first place, he had been brought up, like most Texans, to hate Mexico and the Mexicans. The days of the Lone Star State's fight for freedom were too near to forget. One of his great-uncles had been with Ewen Cameron on his fatal expedition, had drawn a black bean when life and death had been in the balance, and had died with a score of his companions in front of Santa Ana's firing squad. Boone had met old men who remembered the Alamo. A score of incidents in his own time had kept green the bitter memories of earlier times, in many of which no doubt the Texans had been aggressors.

But young Sibley came of honest pioneer stock. His father had been a God-fearing man and had taught him the difference between right and wrong. Yet, in practical application of this teaching, Boone found himself just now in some doubt. Running cattle across the border, with the risk of a desperate fight thrown in, was not plain stealing. It had at least some of the elements of

high adventure, and it might be excused, even though not justified, on the ground that it was despoiling the enemy.

All that Boone was sure of just now was that he must go slowly. He had no intention of letting himself be driven by force of circumstance into a position that would make him an unwilling rustler. He knew that most of the wild young cowboys engaged in lifting cattle were not criminals at heart. They had drifted into lawlessness out of good fellowship or carelessness, or to meet a temporary shortage of funds. But Boone was no drifter. He walked the way of the strong. When he did wrong, it would not be because of weakness but by reason of deliberate choice.

They rode fast, though their horses were tired. It was well enough to assure themselves that the Mexicans dared not injure their captive, but all of them had heard stories that made their blood surge. That these stories might not be true did not affect their feeling, since they believed anything of Mexicans. They were prejudiced beyond hope of change.

After an hour of riding, Edwards drew up. "We'll head for Galeyville, Tom an' me," he said. "Dusty, you an' Mr. Sibley better stay by the trail. Don't get too close to these fellows. The idee is jest to keep tab on them. We'll start soon as we can an' ride for the foot of the round top north of Nigger Bill's claim. Ought to reach there soon after dark. You join us there, Dusty, an' guide us back to where you left Mr. Sibley. After that we'll figure out some way to surprise the greasers."

The herd trail had been dropping down from the mountains through rolling hills toward the flatlands.

The two young men rode through mesquite thickets to open slopes of bear grass, spiked yucca, and tufts of Spanish bayonet. In front of them, a mile and more away, moved a cloud of yellow dust. It drifted leftward in the wind, and when Boone and his friend topped a rise, they could look down on a moving mass, closely bunched, as is a herd of cattle driven hard. At this distance it was impossible to distinguish horse from cow, but somewhere among those crawling dots was one which represented the figure of a girl whose heart was heavy with dread.

The sun went down. The hot sands of the desert began to cool, though the fine dust still rose from the hoofs of the horses and settled upon the faces of the riders, into their nostrils and baked throats, upon every wrinkle of hat and shirt and boot.

Behind Sugar Loaf Peak the sky was a splash of brilliant hues slashed above the horizon line by the master painter. From moment to moment it changed. The scarlet and the crimson grew less vivid, died away. Violet became purple as the darkness descended over the land. With the coming of night the harshness of the desert softened. Garish details were blotted out. It was as though a magic wand had touched the land to beauty.

The wind freshened. Clouds drifted across the sky. In the air was a hint of coming rain. There would be no moon, perhaps no starlight.

"Reckon I better be hittin' the trail for that round top back of Nigger Bill's," Dusty said. "I don't want to hold back the boys any. You stick right here till we get back. *Adios!*"

Dusty vanished into the night. Before he had gone five yards he was a blur, no more distinct than one of the ironwoods that surrounded them. A moment more, and his position could be told only by the creaking of the saddle and the clop-clop of the horse's hoofs.

Boone delayed only to be sure that Dusty was gone. He had no intention of staying there to wait for the cowboys. Presently he was guiding his horse through the chaparral in the wake of the herd. The Texan rode with a purpose. He had conceived a plan, one that at first thought seemed wild and harebrained. But its boldness, its very danger, might make for success. Failure would prove disastrous, but that was true of most hazardous enterprises.

He had no confidence in the wisdom of any scheme the cowboys might devise. If they succeeded in rescuing Miss McLennon it would be only after a fierce battle and much bloodshed. Boone meant to play a lone hand and trust to a more subtle attack. Both the darkness and the nature of the country favoured him. The terrain was rough and the vegetation thick.

The Texan rode as fast as he could wind in and out among the brush. What he had to do must be done quickly, for fear the clouds be brushed aside by the wind and let the starlight through.

There drifted back to him the lowing of the cattle. He knew cows. As he drew closer he could tell by the bawling that they were thirsty as well as spent and weary.

CHAPTER X

A LONE HAND

BOONE knew he must have luck to succeed. But he knew, too, that by shrewdness and audacity a man sometimes makes his own luck.

He drew closer to the herd, watching for a chance. The steady, insistent bawling, the stringing out of the cattle, made him think that they were drawing close to water. Experience told him that the vaqueros would be strung out as lead, flank, and tail riders.

What he had to determine was at which position Miss McLennon rode and how well she was guarded. He drew closer to the right flank and presently brought his horse alongside the longhorns. Just in front of him a rider moved.

The vaquero called to one riding on the point to look out for the cutbank. He spoke, of course, in Spanish.

The cattle bunched. Evidently they had reached a deep arroyo, and the leaders were hesitating on the edge. Boone pulled his hat low. A bandanna handkerchief covered his face from the bridge of the nose down, ostensibly to protect him from the dust. He put his horse to a canter and swung back of the herd.

A vaquero, turning back a straying cow, shouted a

question at him. Had they come to water? Without stopping, Boone called back an answer. He could speak Spanish like a native Mexican.

The Texan passed within five yards of one of the drag drivers, who mistook him in the darkness for one of his companions. By this time Boone knew that Miss McLennon must be with some of the men on the left flank or point. So far his luck had stood up fine.

The bunching of the cattle was fortunate for Boone. The two swing men were close in, urging the beasts on the outskirts forward to bring pressure on those in front. Unnoticed, the Texan rode past them.

Excitement drummed in Boone's veins. The young woman was directly in front of him, not more than seven or eight yards away. She was still riding behind one of the Mexicans. A second vaquero rode on the left.

Boone staked all he had on one card. "Head them up the arroyo, not down," he called.

It is the instinct of a Mexican peon to take orders first and question them later, if at all. The vaquero beside the girl put his horse to a jog-trot and slithered down into the arroyo to turn the cattle.

Next moment Boone ranged up beside the horse carrying double. He pushed in between it and the cattle. The unsuspecting Mexican turned to speak to him, and at the same instant the Texan's deft fingers withdrew the man's revolver from its pocket on the chaps.

The vaquero's startled eyes stared at him. Out of nowhere an Americano had suddenly appeared and disarmed him. His own weapon pressed against his rib-

In another moment bullets would be tearing out his vitals. Terror held him dumb.

Boone's cool voice, in good, understandable Spanish, gave quiet directions. "Turn to the left into the chaparral. Easy now. Don't you make a break an' I'll not hurt you."

The man gasped. He took little stock in the promise, but the gun barrel pressing against his ribs was a mighty persuader. He swung his mount slowly to the left and rode into the brush. Boone kept pace with him, step for step. They wound in and out, skirting mesquite and cholla and prickly pear. For a hundred yards Boone held to that even pace, without another word being spoken.

Then he gave another order. "Get outa that saddle slowly. On this side. Stand right there with yore hands up. Now move forward exactly like I tell you. Keep to the right of that cholla. Head for the big mesquite. . . . Now to the left. No, stay in the open."

He gave no directions to the girl. It was not necessary. She had slipped at once into the saddle left vacant and was riding beside him. He remembered afterward, though he did not think of it at the time, that she had not spoken a word, had not made a sound from first to last. Of what she looked like he had not the least idea. His whole attention was concentrated, and had been from the moment he had first seen him, on the Mexican walking in front of them. The man might have another weapon concealed on him. Boone was taking no chances.

They came to a place where two mesquites grew, one on either side. A narrow path ran between them. The

Mexican passed through the opening, then ducked sharply to the right. There was a sound as of a rabbit scuttling into the brush. Boone pushed the branches of the mesquites aside as his horse plunged forward. He stood and watched the prisoner escape.

The young woman spoke. "He got away."

"Yes," the Texan agreed.

She noticed that he made no attempt to follow the man, did not take a shot at the bushes through which he was diving. Her guess was that the man beside her did not want to call attention to their presence by a shot.

"We'd better drift," he said. "Follow me close."

It struck her as odd that he paid no particular attention to her. She was not sure that he had even looked at her. He appeared to think she was just a necessary part of the scenery.

The night became vocal with shouts.

"He's lettin' 'em know," Boone said evenly.

His companion observed that he did not quicken his pace. He held his horse to a walk as he led the way through the mesquite. For hours she had been anxious and frightened. Now she wanted to call out to him to hurry, that if they did not run the Mexicans would come swarming on them like bees. She had controlled herself before the vaqueros, knowing that it would be a mistake to let them know how much afraid she was. Though her fears had choked her, she had given no sign, fighting back the panic in her bosom. The reaction of weakness was now on her.

"Won't they find us?" she asked in a small voice.

"No chance," he said over his shoulder, without stopping. "They won't even look for us, I reckon. They don't know where they're at. Might be a dozen cowboys trailin' them instead of just me. Right now they're bunched together expectin' an attack. It would look like suicide for them to start combing the brush for us."

There was reassurance in his quiet, steady voice, poise in the flat-backed figure clamped to the saddle. Whoever he might be, she knew that he was a man unafraid and one very sure of himself. They were following a crooked trail on account of the rough terrain and the heavy growth of mesquite and cactus, but she knew they were travelling as directly as possible to some given point he had in mind. Not once did he hesitate.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To yore friends. We're to meet up back here a ways."

They were climbing a stony slope where there was little vegetation except some catclaw and scrub palo verde. He fell back beside her.

"Did they send you to get me?"

"No, ma'am. They had other notions. While they were away roundin' up help, I played a lone hand."

The scudding clouds, driven by the wind, no longer hid the stars just overhead. For the first time their eyes met, and for a long moment held fast. She had an odd feeling that she was plunging fathoms deep into the cold steel-gray depths of his. When she reached the surface again it was to take a deep breath of recovery. What kind of man was this? she asked herself. Not like the others she had known. It came to her that she was

not going to like him, that there would be the clash of battle between them; and with this went as accompaniment the flash of fear. She was used to victory, but a sure instinct told her she would get little profit of this man.

"Who are you?"

It was a question that had been in her mind from the first. Now she flung it at him like a challenge.

"My name is Sibley," he answered, with the little drawl he had inherited.

"From Texas?"

"From Texas."

"Just got into this country?"

"Just got in, ma'am."

In his soft answer there was, she thought, a faint flavour of irony. She resented it. The repetition of her words, some hint of hidden mirth, the cool detachment of him, stung her pride. He was treating her almost as though she were a child. He had saved her, and he made it a matter of no importance. If he stayed in the hills he would find out that Til McLennon could be scornful of men to her heart's content, that when she snapped her fingers half a dozen would come running.

"I've met Texas men—and heard of others," she said, and somehow contrived to make of the remark an offence, even though she hated herself for it.

Boone smiled, not at her but at the stars. She found, for the first of many times, that he had an irritating capacity for silence. What she meant was clear enough. A good many of the riff-raff from Texas, wild young hellions ready for any deviltry, had drifted into Arizona

and New Mexico. This was notorious. They had been used as "warriors," to employ the local name, in the Lincoln County war where Billy the Kid achieved notoriety. They were floating in and out of every frontier town in the Southwest. Dozens of them were now rustling for a living in Cochise. Why did he not speak up and resent her insinuation so that she could apologize with a smile that mocked her words?

Yet, even while she felt the stir of antagonism, deep within her flowed a current of gratitude. What the intentions of the Mexicans had been she did not know. Perhaps they had taken her along merely as a hostage, to protect them against attack. But their view toward her might have changed. Racial hatred might have stirred their inflammable passions. And he had saved her, without a blow, without the firing of a shot, by the coolest audacity and daring. She wanted to pour out to him her thanks, to let him know how much she admired him. It was all she could do to keep from breaking down and sobbing out her relief.

If he had been less flinty, less indifferent, she could have told him what was in her heart. Once she tried.

"I—I want—if you hadn't come——"

Her voice faltered. He waved her emotion aside as a matter of no importance. "Psho! The boys would have been around after a while, don't you reckon? An' the greasers wouldn't have harmed you none. Onct they had reached the line they would have turned you loose."

His manner froze her. He had thrust her gratitude back on her almost carelessly, almost insultingly. It was hateful of him, she felt, to put her in such a position im-

mediately after having rescued her. She bit her lip to keep back the quick tears.

After that they rode in silence. Once or twice they stopped to listen. He knew that they were close to the place where Dusty Rhodes had left him.

Presently he stopped. "We'll wait here," he said.

"What for? Why can't we go on to the ranch? Or toward Galeyville? We'd likely meet them."

"An' more likely not. No, we'll stay here."

He was right, of course, and she knew it. None the less, she rebelled at his easy assurance, his assumption that any decision he made would be final. What right had he to step into her life and take charge of it, even for a little while? And on the heel of that thought, with swift repentance, came another: if he had not taken charge of it, she would still be riding the heavy-hearted trail to Sonora.

They waited, once more in silence, until out of the darkness came sounds of horses' hoofs striking stones, the jingle of bits, the voices of men.

CHAPTER XI

MISS TILATHA RAISES HER VOICE

THE voices were raised in debate.

"If you ask me," one of them urged, "I'd say stampede the herd an' get the greasers on the run. They'll drop Miss Tillie quick enough then."

"Hmp! How d'you know they will? They'd prob'ly all light out for the line hellamile an' leave their stock. Then where would we be at in the darkness? My notion is to lay for these guys an' bushwhack 'em."

"How about makin' them a proposition to keep the stock if they'll turn over Til to us? Kinda flag of truce business."

One of the men raised a shout. "You there, Sibley?"

"Here," Boone called back.

As the men rode up the young woman moved forward.

Dusty gave a gasp of astonishment.

"Hugh!" the girl cried.

A big man, broad-shouldered and rawboned, flung himself from a horse and ran toward her. "Til!" he shouted. Then, "Where'd you come from? How'd you get away from the greasers?"

"Mr. Sibley took me from them."

"Took you? How took you?"

"Just rode up and got me."

They stared at her and at the young man sitting at

negligent ease on his horse, a little way back from the group. For an hour they had been discussing how to rescue this girl without endangering her life, and, lo! it had been done.

"How rode up an' got you?" asked Dusty.

"Why, rode up—acted like he was one of 'em, spoke Mex to 'em, and made my guard ride off into the brush with me."

"Made him?" Hugh repeated.

"With a gun poked into his ribs. Then he let the guard go back and brought me here."

"But, hell's bells! how many of the vaqueros were there?"

"Eight."

"Eight! An' he rode up an' took you away from eight fightin' greasers?"

"Not exactly." It was Boone's cool drawl speaking for the first time. "I reckoned some would be on the point, some on the flank, an' some pushin' along the drag. All I had to do was to locate the lady, surprise the gent or gents in charge, an' persuade him or them to let her come back with me."

"That was all, eh? An' if they got a good look at you, why they'd pump a pint of lead into you. Fine."

"It was right dark, Dusty."

"Was it any darker for them than it was for you?"

"I was lookin' for them an' they weren't lookin' for me. A big difference. Then, too, they were busy gettin' the cattle down to water. I passed three or four on the jump, an' not one took a second look at me. That's the way I figured it might be."

"Didn't you figure it might be another way?" Dusty asked. "I'd go quite some way for a friend of mine's sister, but——"

"I had the drop on the fellow with Miss McLennon," interruped Boone. "He wasn't any more dangerous than a brush rabbit."

"Well, you take the cake, brother. You sure go through from hell to breakfast. Me, I ain't got the nerve to jump eight guys all armed an' on the prod. I'd be scared my days wouldn't be long in the land, as Parson Brown usta say."

Someone laughed, not pleasantly.

Without turning his head, Dusty snapped out a question. "Somethin' on yore mind, Tom?"

"Why, I was thinkin' I would admire for to see you—or yore friend either—pullin' off this grand-stand play. I expect it would be right amusin'." Tracy's voice carried a jeer.

"Yes? Meanin' what?"

"Oh, nothin'. Just a private notion of my own."

"Mebbe a fellow sometimes had better close-herd his private notions," Dusty said to the world at large.

The blustering answer of Tracy came promptly: "Say, fellow, anyone that tries to ride me is liable to go to sleep in smoke."

Hugh McLennon cut in curtly: "That'll do, Tom. Nobody cares a plugged dime what you think. Me, I'm indebted to Mr. Sibley right consid'rable. He can hang his hat up at the ranch long as he's a mind to. What next, gents? I aim to cut dirt back to the ranch with my sister. Anyone headin' thataway?"

There was a moment's silence. Edwards broke it.

"Do we let these greasers get off scot free after they done killed poor Bill?"

"Better send 'em a vote of thanks," Tracy suggested.

The subject was one that could not be discussed before all of these present without dangerous admissions. The cowboys had been rustling cattle belonging to the Mexicans at the time of the attack which had resulted in the death of Bill. Since he had been shot down in fair fight, there was no need of avenging his death. But Hugh McLennon and those who thought with him could not raise this point before the stranger Sibley or before the young woman.

"Dusty, you ride on a ways with Mr. Sibley an' Til," advised Hugh. "I got to cinch this saddle tighter."

"A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse, Hugh," his friend murmured.

The three rode toward the hills, a man on each side of Miss McLennon. The stars were out, and for the first time Boone got a good look at the girl. She was wearing plain leather chaps and a dust-brown shirt. The sun had browned her face to a coffee tint. She rode with the straight back and the easy saddle of long experience. So far she was externally a product of her environment. But out of question she was an individual of a very specialized variety. Through the tan burned the rich bloom of youth. The skin was fine-textured as satin. Beneath long lashes incredibly live eyes gleamed insolence or passion or sulkiness. For one moment he had seen them flash gifts of love to her brother. He guessed she was an untamed little devil, ruling her slaves with a

rod of iron. That temperament would go with her red hair.

In the darkness he smiled. Boone was impervious to the charms of women. Their moods did not disturb him. He lived his life among men.

Dusty was the first to speak. "You got that coyote Tracy, didn't you, Sibley? Got what he meant? That's his way, always hintin' an' hintin'."

"It doesn't matter what he says or thinks," the girl said impatiently. "Hugh is right about that. Why do you quarrel with him, Dusty?"

"I get sore at him. For instance, just now. What did he mean? That Sibley here had some kind of stand-in with the greasers?"

"He's a jealous cur—doesn't like anyone to get a good word except himself. You oughtn't to pay any attention to him," she reproved.

"He's got no license to ride me," the cowboy protested.

"Just pay no attention to him," she advised virtuously.

Dusty looked at her and grinned. He was thinking that it depended on whose steer was gored. Til McLennon would not for a moment let Tom Tracy or any other man run over her without putting him in his place.

Horses cantered toward them. Out of the darkness rode Hugh McLennon and a nester named Charles Brown.

"Where are the others?" the young woman asked sharply.

"They're headin' for Galeyville," her brother said, after a moment's pause.

She pulled up her horse and listened. The far faint sound of horses' hoofs could be heard. "They're not, either. They're not going that way."

"All right. If you know already so doggone well why do you ask?" her brother said impatiently. "It's none of yore business anyhow, is it?"

"They've gone south," she charged.

"South or north, do you care?"

He caught the rein of her horse and started it. Though she pulled the rein from his hand, she let her mount move forward beside his. The other three fell in behind. Boone could hear fragments of what she and Hugh said to each other.

"I know where they've gone," she flung at her brother.

"Not yore business—or mine."

". . . own fault . . . get killed some day."

"Shet yore mouth, girl."

The men behind dropped farther back. This seemed to be a family quarrel.

Charley Brown chuckled. "She sure hasn't got red hair for nothing. Miss Til is a right up-an'-comin' young lady."

In the back of Boone's mind stirred some vague remembrance, some cutback to days long since past. Was it a tone of voice? Or was it some familiar scene or words brought back? "Shet yore mouth" . . . a brother subduing a vixenish little sister . . . a tangle of wild red hair. Why, it was on the Brazos just after he ran away from

home. And the little pest's name was Til—Til McLennon. He was almost sure the brother had been called Hugh.

To draw out information Boone asked a careless question of Dusty. "Just the two of 'em in the family?"

"That's whatever. Old man McLennon died year before last. Got thrown by a wild horse."

"They're mighty clever* folks, too," Brown said. "Think a lot of each other, Hugh an' Miss Til do."

The girl's voice came back to them, lifted rebelliously. "I had a right to ride out an' find out who were driving them. It's a free country, ain't it?"

Dusty laughed, with relish. "They sure enough do, Sibley. Her bark is worse than her bite."

Boone made no comment. Come to think about it he might have safely predicted that she would grow up into a tempery woman.

They came, by steep trails which circled hills and plunged into gulches, to a mountain park watered by a stream twisting across the meadow. Here the current was deep and swift close to the bank, there it widened and grew shallow, with riffles foaming down.

"Trout here, looks like," Boone commented.

"Y'betcha!" Dusty agreed.

The horses splashed through and climbed a slope leading to the house. The riders dismounted.

"Show Mr. Sibley the bunkhouse, Dusty," said McLennon. "Soon as you've washed up, come up to the house for supper."

*In the Southwest the word clever has the significance of friendly and agreeable.

"Be there pronto," promised Dusty. "I could eat a government mail sack, let alone Til's co'n bread."

To Boone, while the Texan was combing his hair, Dusty stopped drying his face to prophesy: "This ain't any fair test, because she's got to knock together some grub in a hurry, but I'll bet my boots you say it's the best supper you've had in a month. Til has got the world beat as a cook."

Forty minutes later Boone was willing to agree with Dusty.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE McLENNON RANCH

DUSTY, doing his full duty by the wheat cakes at breakfast, announced that he had to see a fellow in the hills but that he would be back next day.

"If you're not pushin' on yore reins, Sibley, why don't you stick around the ranch to-day?" he suggested. "We'll ride in to Galeyville to-morrow. . . . I could do with another stack of flapjacks, Til."

"Don't hurry Mr. Sibley, Dusty. He hasn't hardly rested his saddle yet," McLennon said. "This is his headquarters while he's up here."

Boone made the proper acknowledgment of this hospitable offer. He added that he had been the guest of the McLennons before.

"Thought you were a stranger in this country," Hugh replied, a little surprised.

"I am. Never saw this neck of the woods till yesterday. I expect you've forgot, but more 'n ten years ago yore father took me in an' fed me."

Tilatha, who had gone to the stove for another plate of pancakes, stood waiting for a moment, her eyes on Boone. The Texan thought he had never seen a woman so vivid and so unaware of her own beauty. The sleeves were rolled to the elbows of her well-moulded arms. It

was easy to understand why the cowboys paid court diffidently to this young queen, so free, so untamed, so rhythmic in her movements.

"Back in Texas or here in Arizona?" asked Hugh.

"In Texas. On the Brazos. I was a buffalo hunter." Boone smiled. "You roped me from my pony an' yanked me outa the river."

"The little runaway boy," cried Tilatha. "The one who wouldn't stay with us."

"Yes, ma'am." Again Boone's winning smile warmed his face. "'Bout so big," he quoted, and measured a space on his forefinger with the adjoining thumb.

"We always wondered if the Indians molested you."

"Not till after I reached the camp. They jumped us on the way home an' killed three hunters. One of the three stood 'em off to let me make my getaway."

"We heard about that killin'," Hugh said after a moment of reflection. "It made us hump right fast through the Injun country. An' you're that li'l' boy. Well, it sure is a small world, after all."

It was too unexpected a reunion to dismiss without more talk. Tilatha, in particular, was excited by the discovery. Somehow, she had never forgotten that small boy, so quaintly dignified, of such old-fashioned courtesy, so determined to carry through the enterprise he had begun.

Later in the day, while he was fishing the creek, she wandered down to ask him what luck he was having. With the mannish clothes of yesterday replaced by a simple print frock that was very becoming, she had discarded also her wilfulness and impatience. She was gay and friendly, without any touch of sex coquetry.

"Are you as good a fisherman as Hugh was?" she asked.

He pointed to his string. "I get more, but not as big ones. Of course, this isn't the Brazos."

"There ought to be one in that riffle just above there," she suggested. "Usually there is."

"There was. I got him."

He made a cast toward the opposite bank. A trout struck, but did not take the hook. As Tilatha watched this tall brown man, observed the muscles in his long, flat back, and saw with what light ease he handled himself, she thought she had never seen a human being so well proportioned. The movements of the body seemed to express him. There was no dissipation of energy, no waste of force in the poised rhythm.

"We don't change, after all," she said. "Not the real we. You're that little buffalo hunter grown big, an' I'm the red-headed nuisance that can't mind her own business."

"We shape ourselves some, but I reckon the raw material we have to work with stays always the same," Boone said, with the slight drawl that gave the effect of indifference.

Her brown eyes crinkled to mirth. "I've been rememberin' about the time we met before. You said Pappy ought to drown me."

"Expect I needed to be frazzled with a hickory. You'll be glad to know Wayne Lemley blacksnaked me when I reached the camp."

He hooked a trout, and while he was landing it she did not speak.

"That's a nice one. . . . Dusty Rhodes says you had a run-in with the Quinns."

Before he answered he took care of his catch. "Dusty is a right pleasant old lady," he murmured. "Yes, he sure gets my vote for head of the sewing circle."

"Why shouldn't he tell me? It's common talk for everybody in Cochise."

"Matter of fact, I didn't have any run-in with the Quinns."

"With Curt French, then. It's the same thing. An' Whip Quinn did serve notice on you, didn't he?"

"He recommended Tucson."

"I wouldn't start trouble with them. They're dangerous."

"You have it wrong. I'm noways hostile to the Quinns. If there is no trouble till I start it——"

"They're fighting men—killers. That's the reputation they brought here. So is that Curt French. He's bad. You can't help admiring Russ Quinn an' his brother, but French——"

"I reckon the Quinns are more friendly killers," he said in his gentle, derisive drawl. "Maybe they don't kill you so hard or so rough as Curt."

"They're men," she came back quickly. "Whip an' Russ may meet trouble more than halfway, but they don't go huntin' it."

"Friends of yours?" he asked.

Beneath the tan in her cheeks the quick colour ran. "They are kinda friendly to Hugh an' to lots of the men in the hills."

Boone wondered what was the basis of this friendli-

ness. Why any relationship at all? The Quinns were townsmen, parasites who lived from the pickings of a rich mining camp. What interest had they in cattle, which was the only occupation of the cowboys? And of what benefit would it be to the rustlers and cattlemen to have an understanding with these gamblers whose influence was so potent in Tough Nut? Perhaps it was politics. It was said that Whip wanted to be sheriff, which was a very lucrative fee office. He might be only playing up to the cowboys for their votes. Bob Hardy was deputy United States marshal, and one of Whip's loyal henchmen. The brothers might be trying to get control of the party machine in the county.

The young woman went on, her voice a little anxious: "Don't have trouble with them. Their enemies have bad luck. They are too strong a combination."

"That seems to be a general opinion," he said drily, "I'm not buckin' the combination. If they lay off me, that's all I ask."

"I think they will. I'll speak to Russ," she replied.

Instantly he flung back curt refusal of her aid. "Don't you, onless you want to make trouble. There's nothin' to this, likely. But if they want to run on me, why, that's between them an' me. You're not in it, you or any other woman."

Again the colour flooded her face. She stared at him, her eyes hot with resentment. Her desire had been to do him a service, and his answer had been like a slap in the face. In effect, he had told her to mind her own business. Her stormy gaze challenged for a long moment his steel-cold eyes. She wanted to pour out furious words pell-

mell. Instead, she turned on her heel and walked like an outraged queen to the house.

Boone watched her, a grim little smile on his lips. "That'll hold her, I reckon. No use arguin' or explainin'. She'd have her own way, anyhow. Now she'll keep still. I'd look fine hidin' behind a girl's skirts, wouldn't I?" His thoughts flowed on. "She'd ask Russ to let me off, would she? I expect she figures she's got a right good stand-in with Russ. Well, I can see where one Quinn has a mighty fine reason for tying up with one Chiricahua cattleman."

An hour later Boone returned to the house. Hugh was on the porch sorting out some horseshoes. Every ranch in those days had its own blacksmith shop.

The cowman looked up. "Nice string of trout. Better leave 'em in the kitchen."

Boone walked in. Tilatha was baking pies. There was a dab of flour on one temple where she had brushed back her rebellious hair with the back of a hand.

"Where'll I put the fish, Miss Tilatha?" the Texan asked evenly. His manner ignored the fact that he had so lately managed to get himself out of her good graces.

She looked at him explosively. He was not sure whether she was going to say nothing or a great deal. Unexpectedly, after a tense pause, she surprised him.

"In that pan of water," she said, almost as though she grudged the words.

He did as she had told him, then sauntered out to the porch.

"You might as well hear it now as later," Hugh told him. "Two of the boys got shot up last night."

This was not unexpected. It had been an easy guess that Edwards had led the cowboys in pursuit of the Mexican vaqueros.

"Killed?" asked Boone.

"No. They'll make the grade. Sandy Joe an' Tom Tracy." McLennon hesitated before he continued: "I'm not offerin' advice, you understand, but personally I don't know anything about it. Least said soonest mended, as the fellow says."

There was a flicker of sardonic mirth in Boone's eyes. If this was not advice, he did not know it when he met it. But he intended to follow it and did not resent the suggestion.

"I've got notions along that line myself," Boone agreed. "Most generally I keep my trap shut when in doubt."

"I figured you thataway. Fact is, in Cochise right now a man has got to be some blind. I notice the officers are. Prob'ly there's more going on than they can ride herd on. Fact is, a fellow has to take conditions as he finds them. When I buy a longhorn bunch I got no way of knowin' whether they come up the San Simon with their tails draggin'. Course, I take reasonable precautions as to previous ownership."

A rider had come into the park and was dropping down from the rim to the meadow. As the ranchman talked Boone watched the stranger idly. The horseman splashed through the creek and moved up the slope to the house. He was a big man tanned to bronzed health by wind and sun.

Boone's eyes were no longer indifferent. They had

narrowed slightly when they recognized Russ Quinn. Otherwise there was no change in the Texan. He sat on the porch at negligent ease.

Quinn swung from the saddle with a casual "'Lo, Hugh! How are cases?" He stood there, the bridle still in his hand, looking at Boone. Evidently he was surprised.

"Meet Mr. Sibley, Russ," the ranchman said.

"Why, I've met the gent, Hugh," he said, his manner conveying more than his words. "Down at Tough Nut." His manner dismissed the Texan as unimportant. "Got kinda tired ridin' the stage an' come up for a coupla days."

"Fine. Long as you like."

"Anything new?"

"No-o, I reckon not. How about down yore way?"

"Stage robbed yesterday near Bisbee. They killed Buck Galway."

"Buck was the messenger?"

"Yep. Never got a chance for his white alley. The fellow cut loose on him before he hollered to stop."

"How many hold-ups?"

"Two. Masked, of course." Quinn looked at the Texan deliberately from head to foot. "One of 'em a tall, well-built fellow on a sorrel." He added presently, "With a kind of Texas drawl."

"You might be describing me an' my horse," Boone said in his low voice, meeting the look of the other.

"Didn't happen to be down Bisbee way yesterday about 10 A. M. in the mornin', did you?" Quinn asked insolently.

"No, I didn't. Did you?"

Russ laughed hardily. "You got a come-back, fellow. I wasn't askin' did you hold up the stage. Thought mebbe you might have met the birds that did."

"Not that I know of. I've met undesirable characters off an' on lately, though."

"Well, so have I." Quinn turned his back on the Texan and spoke in a low voice to McLennon.

Boone rose and strolled over to the stable.

"When did that fellow show up, Hugh?" asked Quinn.

"About sundown yesterday. Don't get off on the wrong foot, Russ. He didn't hold up the stage."

"How you know he didn't?"

"He's not that kind. Anyhow, he was with Dusty all day."

"With Dusty, eh? A middle-sized cowboy wearin' chaps an' a brown shirt." The last was apparently a quotation.

"Now, looky here, Russ. If you're implyin' that Dusty was in that hold-up——"

"I'm not. I'm just mentionin' a coincidence. I don't presume he rode a bay horse."

"He did. I reckon there ain't more'n several thousand bay horses in Cochise. I ride one myself. Maybe I did it."

"We lost the tracks, but they were headin' this way."

"How far back?"

"A long way. I don't claim I tracked them here."

Hugh shook his head. "No, sir, you're sure barkin' up the wrong tree, Russ. Lemme tell you about that fellow Sibley."

Quinn dropped the reins to the ground and sat down on the porch. "Shoot yore story," he said. "I'm listenin'."

The ranchman told what he knew of the Texan, both as boy and man. "I never saw a gamer fellow or one I'd rather have to back my play," he added by way of comment.

"I ain't denyin' he's got guts. It took guts to stand up to Curt French. That's not got a thing to do with it," Quinn replied.

"It has, too. No game man would have shot down Buck Galway when there wasn't any need of it. Either a killer or a coward did that."

"How do you know this Sibley isn't a killer?"

"He don't look like one."

"That's just what he does, Hugh. Think up the killers you've met. Aren't most of 'em quiet, soft-spoken, gray-eyed birds who look as though they were never lookin' for trouble?"

"I've seen that kind."

"The most dangerous kind. See what this fellow did to Curt French—knocked him cold an' walked off without a scratch on him."

"The way I heard that was——"

Quinn waved the explanation aside. "I'm not blamin' him. He can put up a reasonable story about bein' in the right. That ain't what I'm drivin' at. The point is there's trouble wherever these fellows are. It just drifts their way, looks like. They may claim they're not to blame. Anyhow, it happens."

"Lookin' at this thing fair an' square, Russ, you'll

have to admit a fellow doesn't have to be a trouble hunter to get into a rookus with Curt. He's a sure enough bully. You'll have to admit that."

"His parlour manners ain't ladylike, if that's what you mean."

"Me, I like this Texan, personally."

"Me, I don't, personally."

McLennon smiled. "Well, every fellow I don't like isn't necessarily a stage robber. I reckon that goes with you, too."

"I haven't claimed he is. All I say is, I wouldn't put it past him, an' there's circumstantial evidence against him."

"Look here, Russ. I know Dusty right well. He's a good boy, take him by an' large. If he'd helped murder Buck Galway in cold blood, he wouldn't of sat here joshin' this mornin' like he didn't have a care in the world. No, sir. You better get this fool notion outa yore head."

"Dusty might of been an innocent bystander at the killin'. There's a difference between holdin' up a stage an' shootin' down without reason a man who hasn't hurt you any an' who doesn't have to be killed."

Still arguing, they moved toward the stable with Quinn's horse.

CHAPTER XIII

THREE THOUSAND DOLLARS, DEAD OR ALIVE

DUSTY watched Russ Quinn saddle the two horses. The cowboy sat on the porch with his back against a post, legs stretched at full length. On his face there was a look of disgust. His companion guessed it was due to jealousy.

"That fellow sure has ridden close herd on Til all day. First off, when I drifted in, she was fishin' an' Russ fixin' her lines like she couldn't do it well as he can. Now he's aimin' to go ridin' with her. They seem to be havin' a right nice time. If a girl liked that big black kind of guy, she'd call him good-lookin', don't you reckon?"

"I reckon."

"Nothin' to me, of course, but shucks! he's no kind of man for her to encourage."

"Is she encouragin' him?" Boone was amused at his friend's naïve complaint.

"What else would you call it? Actin' like he's the only man on earth. She'd ought to know any of the Quinns are bad medicine for any girl. She does know it, too."

"Maybe that's why she likes to be with him," the Texan said indolently. "Nice tame good men don't go so strong with women, I notice."

"Saddlin' that pinto for her now. Hmp! There he goes

helpin' her on so tender, an', by cripes! I've seen her swing on that bronc without ever touchin' the stirrups."

"Prob'ly a handsome bad man wasn't beauing her right then," Boone suggested.

"What I say is you never can tell about a woman, not when it comes to a man. They don't use their judgment, looks like. I'd sure hate to see Til marry Russ Quinn. He's got his good p'ints, but he'd sure ruin her life. He's one of these here masterful devils, an' that wouldn't suit Til."

"Wouldn't it?"

"Not by a jugful. She wants to rule the roost her own self. He'd break her spirit like he would a wild horse. That's the Quinn of it. Rule or ruin. Likely he's got her fooled into thinkin' she can twist him round her li'l' finger."

"They're sure a good-lookin' couple on horseback. . . . Hugh is callin' you, Dusty."

The cowboy bowlegged his way to the corral. For ten minutes he engaged in conversation with the ranch owner, after which he returned to the house.

"Heluva note," he said to Boone, apparently not sure whether to be annoyed or amused. "Hugh says the stage was robbed near Bisbee day before yesterday an' they are claimin' we did it, you an' me."

"Got that far, have they? I had a notion that was comin'."

"You knew about it?"

"Only what Russ Quinn said. He hadn't got farther than insinuations yesterday."

"Well, I don' know as he claims we did it, out an' out. But he sure enough describes us an' our horses. Hugh told him he was crazy with the heat, but I noticed he was glad to have me tell him there is nothin' to it. I've been some wild, an' with a cowboy most generally you cain't tell. He's liable to go bad unexpected after a spree. Worst of it is they killed Buck Galway, the shotgun messenger."

"You're unfortunate in yore friends, Dusty," the Texan drawled. "The Quinns would like to hang this on me, if they could. It's a convenient excuse to drive me outa the country."

"I reckon I'm drug in because I was with you. Well, don't you worry about me, Boone; if the Quinns ride me too hard, my sixshooter will be smokin' right beside yours."

The other man shook his head. "Don't talk thataway, Dusty. We're law-abidin' citizens, an' we don't aim to go gunfannin' like a pair of crooks. First off, we'll ride into Galeyville an' see what talk there is, if any."

"Then what?"

"If there's a serious charge against me, I'm going back to Tough Nut to face it down."

"Would that be wise, do you reckon? If the Quinns are fixin' to hang this on you, they'll have evidence, you can bet yore boots. An' Buck was popular. No tellin' how far a drunken crowd might go if it was worked up. The only alibi we got is somewheres up in the Dragoons. We might be gosh-awful dead before we could dig up our witnesses."

"A fellow has to take chances when his good name

is at stake. That's my platform. You don't need to take my view of it."

Dusty flushed. "If you go, I will, too."

They saddled and took the road for Galeyville. The wagon tracks ran plain before them. Half a mile from the house Dusty drew up. He pointed to the marks of horses' hoofs deflecting from the road to follow a bridle path.

"They're takin' the high-line trail," he said gloomily.

"He's showin' good judgment. Don't tell me, Dusty, you'd stick to the main-travelled road if you had such good company."

They held to the wagon tracks, though the cowboy looked up at the pine-clad slope regretfully. To ride the high trails in dappled sunshine, with the blue sky back of the green trees, the lady of one's choice beside one, is an enchanting experience; to know that another man is riding them under the same conditions not so exhilarating.

"We'll beat 'em to town an hour," Dusty predicted mournfully.

It developed that he was more or less a true prophet.

Galeyville was a one-street 'dobe town. Chiefly it consisted of saloons, gambling houses, one-room mud huts, and two or three shaft houses with gray dumps drooping from them like great beards. There were, too, a couple of general stores.

The two riders tied up at a hitch rack and went into one of the saloons. Eight or nine men, evidently cowboys, were in the place. Four were playing stud poker.

Two were having a drink at the bar. One lay on a bench asleep.

"'Lo, Dusty," someone called. "When did you-all get back?"

Boone noticed that the eyes of all present, except those of the sleeping man, turned curiously upon him. And more than curiously. There was in their regard a wary intentness. They had heard about him. That was clear. What had they heard? About his brush with French? About the rescue of Miss McLennon? No doubt. But had they heard, too, that he was charged with stage robbery and the murder of the shotgun messenger?

"Meet Mr. Sibley." Thus Dusty, in a sweeping introduction to all present.

The Texan nodded to two or three of those nearest and moved to the bar. He knew that the eyes still watched him, but no evidence that he knew it reached the cowboys. He was at ease, unconcerned, indifferent. He drank, watched the stud game for a few minutes, sauntered out.

Dusty stayed. His friend had murmured a suggestion.

"Find out what they know."

Boone moved across the street to one of the stores. There were three or four men inside. One was inquiring for mail, another trying on a pair of boots. But at his entrance business was suspended. Again he was the focus of all their regard. These men, too, had heard of a stranger answering his description. They, too, watched him with a fascination respectful but ominous.

In Cattleland news flies on the wings of the wind.

It is swept, with incredible swiftness, to the remotest ranch and the loneliest cow camp. It happened that Boone was the central figure of three startling episodes. He had whipped Curt French. He had rescued the McLennon girl from nine armed Mexicans. He had robbed a stage and killed Buck Galway. That this last was not true did not matter. An accused man is guilty in popular opinion till proved innocent.

These recent adventures were reason enough for the attention given him. Yet Boone was not entirely satisfied with his explanation. It did not cover the whole ground, he felt. The absorption of their interest in him held an eagerness almost wolflike. The glitter in the eyes of some of these men suggested that they were crouched for the pounce. Why? Even if he were an outlaw, what personal attraction had he for them?

To pass time, he was buying a pocket knife. His manner was easy and unconcerned. Apparently, he gave his whole attention to examining the quality of the steel. Yet all his senses were keyed to alertness.

He was aware of a man coming into the store, and knew a moment later that the person was Dusty. Without turning his head, he became conscious that the cowboy was striding fast, that he was moved by excitement.

"Let's git outa here *pronto*," whispered Dusty in the ear of his friend. The young man's voice was rough and hoarse.

"I'll take this one," Boone said casually. "What's the tariff?"

"Six bits," the clerk said. He too showed excite-

ment. His face had the shine and the pallor of the consumptive, but a red spot burned in each cheek.

Boone did not hurry. He paid for the knife and sauntered down the aisle toward the door, the centre of still fixed observation.

Once outside, Dusty almost dragged him down the steps to what protection there was in the adobe wall of the store.

"We got to light out," the cowboy exploded. "There's a reward for us—three thousand for you, five hundred for me."

A reward! Boone understood now what the glittering eyes had been telling him. The emotions shining out of the faces of some of these men had been greed and the lust to strike, tempered by the uncertainty of fear.

"Dead or alive?" asked Boone evenly.

His question struck at the very heart of the matter. If he was worth as much dead as alive, they very likely would not risk an attempt to capture him. A shot from the window of some saloon might drop him at any moment.

"Dead or alive, either one," Dusty answered. "Jim Barkalow got in from Tough Nut an hour ago with the news. Listen, Boone. They don't want me, none of the boys. It's you they're after. Well, we got to hustle. They're talkin' it over—what they had best do. I'll kinda saunter up an' get the horses."

Boone shook his head. "Too late, Dusty."

An eruption of men had poured out of the saloon in front of which the two mounts were tied. Also, the Texan noted, a man and a woman, riding down the

street, had reached the spot. The man was Russ Quinn, his companion Miss McLennon. Quinn swung from the saddle and joined the other men.

"Some of the boys were talkin' up for you, 'count of what you did for Til," Dusty explained. "Listen, Boone, I'll go try an' talk 'em out of any notions they got."

"You're not in this, Dusty. Like you say, it's me they want. I'll play a lone hand."

A shot sounded. A bullet struck the adobe wall behind Boone and sent dirt flying.

"That come from lower down the street," Dusty cried in excitement.

"This town will be a hornet's nest in three minutes. Get back into the store, Dusty."

"No, by golly. Not without you."

Another bullet struck the wall.

"We gotta go, Boone." As he spoke, Dusty crossed in front of his friend, intending to duck around the corner of the store.

At the same moment came the crack of a revolver. Boone caught sight of a face, almost directly opposite them, lifted above a windowsill.

Dusty turned to his friend, a look almost of incredulity on his face. "I'm hit, doggone it," he said petulantly, catching at Boone to steady himself.

The hinge of one knee shut up like a knife blade. Boone caught him, dragged him up the store steps, and left him just inside the door.

Yet another moment and the Texan was again outside. Even as he leaped from the steps he saw that the

group of cowboys from the saloon above were moving down, Russ Quinn a few yards in advance of them, that a bald-headed man with a rifle was peering out of a doorway at him seventy-five yards below, that two others were crouched behind cottonwoods a little back from the road. He was cut off from his horse. Both ends of the street were blocked.

Viciously bullets spat at him. One took a splinter from the window frame close to his head. Others scattered dirt from the soft adobe wall. He zigzagged across the street and plunged into the first open doorway he saw.

CHAPTER XIV

TILATHA DOES NOT KNOW

WHAT Dusty had said was true. Tilatha had been more kind than usual to Russ Quinn. It was as though some inner excitement drove her to him. She was cherishing resentment against another man, but she would have denied that that had anything to do with it.

She loved to ride. There was something that stimulated her interest in the dark personality of Quinn. Was it necessary to give herself any other reason why she rode to Galeyville with him?

After they took the upper trail, they rode in silence until it broadened sufficiently for Quinn to join her knee to knee.

"No, you're wrong, Russ," she said in her decisive way, pursuing their previous conversation. "I don't believe it at all. He's not that kind. Mind, I don't like a hair of his head. He's so insultingly——"

She stopped to search for a word, then spat out, "superior" for want of a more definite one. "He thinks a woman should sit in the corner and sew. A detestable man!"

"Then what makes you so sure he didn't rob the stage?"

"Because. He doesn't look like one of that kind. He isn't one."

"Can you tell a stage robber by the colour of his hair, girl? Do you reckon a hold-up man looks different from anyone else?"

"I could tell my brother isn't one, couldn't I?" she flung out.

"All right. Name some fellow that does look like one," he persisted, with a view to making her position untenable. Somehow it annoyed him that she should defend this fellow Sibley against him. He wanted to drive her to admit that he was right.

Tilatha was a little irritated herself. She did not have to accept his opinions ready made. "Well, yore friend Curt French looks like he might be one," she said, not without malice.

. He turned dark eyes on her, frowning. "I wouldn't say that if I was you, even if I was funnin'."

"I'm not funning," she replied with spirit. "You asked me what I thought a hold-up might look like an' I told you. An' why shouldn't I say it about Curt French if you do about Mr. Sibley?"

Quinn was not looking for a quarrel with her. He laughed a little sourly. "Have it yore own way, girl. All I meant was that Curt——"

"—might come in an' beat my head off if he heard," she cut in. "Like he did to this Mr. Sibley."

"You get the last word, Til," he said ruefully. Then added: "Women sure take the cake. You claim you don't like this pilgrim Sibley, but you stick up for him through hell an' high water, beggin' yore pardon."

"I don't, either." She cast in her mind for a simile. The one she found was not very apropos, but it was the best at hand. "I don't like Benedict Arnold, but I don't have to believe that he tried to poison George Washington, do I?"

"You win."

"After what he did for me, I ought to like this Mr. Sibley, but he gets my back up so. I s'pose I'm ungrateful."

"Oh, well, leave him lay. No use worryin' about him. One o' these days, if he stays around here promiscuous, Curt will make him step high as a blind dog in a stubble field. . . . It's been a thousand years since I saw you, Til. Last week I tried to make it out here, but I couldn't cut it. A gold shipment going out, an' the company wanted me to take it."

"You get tired of town, I reckon. At least I soon do. The wild-cherry blossoms are lovely, aren't they?"

"No, I don't get tired of town," he answered. "An' I didn't come to see wild-cherry blossoms but a wild rose with thorns. I aim to pluck it one o' these days. Right soon, too."

She did not look at him. Her gaze was on the trail ahead, but she knew his bold, dark eyes were on her, filled with passionate and possessive desire. It did not just now suit her to challenge his assurance.

"The thorns might prick you," she said lightly.

"Who cares? I wouldn't have my rose without the thorns." He opened his big brown hand and closed it tightly. The back of his fingers were covered with

short black hair. There was something almost cruel in the strength of the gesture. "I'll crush 'em—the thorns—till there's no sting left in 'em."

Her smile was not quite true. "Don't you think you might crush the rose, too?" she asked.

But she did not wait for an answer. They had come to an open plateau on a hilltop, and she put her horse to a canter.

One of these days she would have to make up her mind about this dark Quinn. He was a strong man, positive, assertive. It was his boast that he always got what he wanted. Well developed in him were the primal virtues of the frontier. No man without these could hope to marry Tilatha McLennon, for she was of the outdoors, what the wind and the sun and pioneering ancestors had made her. But she knew a score of men who possessed courage and energy, were faithful to their friends. More than these she demanded of the man who was to be her mate.

As yet there was some barrier between her and Russ Quinn. Her heart had not been swept toward him on a tide of emotion. More than once she had wondered why. He was stronger than she, and she wanted for her husband a dominant man, even though she did not know it. When she thought of him, little doubts crept into her musings. She was not sure about the inner quality of the man. He could be hard and ruthless. He had killed, more than once, she had heard. This was bad, but not of itself fatal to his chances if he had slain from imperative need. What she must find out beyond

question was the nature of the real Russ Quinn. Was he evil in his heart? She did not know, and the very uncertainty made her push him away for the time, at least. Before she gave her life into his keeping or that of any man, she must be very sure of him.

Therefore she evaded the issue during the ride, not once only, but several times. By the light turn of a phrase, by the touch of a spur to her pony's side, by a sudden exclamation at sight of a flowering ocotillo, she deflected his attention until they reached Galeyville.

He was not naturally a patient man, this dark, dangerous wooer. But he had all the self-confidence in the world. The girl was interested in him. He knew that. She was a little afraid of him. That did not displease him; he had seen more than once how it kindled a woman's feeling for him. She would think about him when he was not present, and her emotions would quicken. If it suited her to play for time—well, he could afford to wait.

They rode into Galeyville quite unaware that the next hour or two would decide for all time who was to be the captain of her heart.

At a road gait they jogged up the dusty street.

Out of the Silver Dollar saloon men poured like pips squirted from a lemon.

"There's something wrong," Tilatha cried.

Her companion did not answer. He swung from the saddle and joined the excited group.

Someone flung at him an explanation. "It's the road agent who killed Buck Galway."

A shot rang out.

Tilatha's eyes swept down the road, even as another revolver sounded. Two men were standing in front of Pete Andrews's store, and it was at these the shots were being fired. One of the men was Dusty Rhodes, the other Boone Sibley.

CHAPTER XV

A FLAG OF TRUCE

TILATHA sat her horse, petrified by horror, while the guns blazed at their target. Neither Rhodes nor Sibley had his sixshooter out. She wanted to scream a useless warning to them, but the vocal chords in her throat were frozen. Why didn't they run? Why did they stand . . .?

The girl found her voice in a cry of despair. Dusty had gone down. She saw his friend stoop, pick him up, and carry the body into the store. Then, to her terror, Sibley was back again on the steps, the guns once more roaring at him.

Through lanes of fire he darted across the street. Every instant she expected to see him plunge to the ground, shot through and through. But his foes were too many and too hurried. They hampered one another. They flung their bullets wildly at their victim. He reached Sanford's store and vanished within.

"Got away," someone gulped out with an oath.

"Like a streak of cat before a bulldog," another cried.

Russ Quinn took charge of the attack. "Bart, you take four-five of the boys an' see he don't get out the back way. If he shows up, plug him. Van, you hold the other end of the street. See yore boys ain't too

brash. This fellow is a killer. I'll handle this end. We've got him. All we got to do is smoke him out."

The girl's heart sank. They were going to kill him like a cornered rat. She must do something—stop this murder. What could she do?

From the front door of the store Sanford and his clerk came hurriedly. "He's locked himself in," the proprietor said. "You fellows want to be careful. There's all kinds of guns there."

Tilatha slipped from her mount and ran to Quinn. "You can't do this," she cried. "You can't do it. He's the wrong man."

Russ Quinn turned to her, listening while he brought his mind back to understand what she wanted. He stood there impatiently, his slightly bowed legs set apart, a big, black purposeful man with a Colt's .45 in one hand. Then, silently, with a sweep of an arm, he brushed her aside. This was not women's business.

Tilatha caught at the sleeve of another man. "He didn't kill Buck Galway!" she cried. "He isn't the man."

"Didn't, eh? Bet yore boots he did. The poster's tacked up in the saloon—name, description, horse, everything. An' three thousand reward, dead or alive. Sure we got the right bird."

"No, no, Jim. Stop to think. This man saved me from the Mexicans day before yesterday, just a little while after the hold-up."

"About ten hours after," the cowboy corrected. "Sure. Why wouldn't he? Makin' a bluff to cover his tracks. Likely he was in cahoots with the greasers.

You said yore own self he didn't have to fire a shot."

She turned to another man, a young fellow who was an admirer from a distance. She had seen him watching her at dances.

"You won't let 'em do this awful thing, will you, Ted? It's all wrong."

He was embarrassed and distressed. "Nothin' I could do," he said. "I'd help you if I could, but they're hell-bent on going through. You can see for yoreself how it is, Miss Tillie."

"Go to the ranch for my brother. Ride fast," she begged.

He did not want to go. She saw that. But still less did he wish to refuse. "All right," he said reluctantly. "But it won't do any good. He'll not get here in time."

"He may, if you hurry."

The cowboy swung to a saddle and rode out of town.

For the first time in her life Tilatha felt quite helpless. As child and young woman, she had gone her self-willed way. Early she had discovered that she could get what she wanted by clamorous insistence. That had been when she was still a long-legged brat with a wild tangle of red hair. Later she changed her tactics, having gained in worldly wisdom. It was not necessary to get into a temper to win out, not if one happened to be the prettiest girl in Cochise County. A smiling suggestion would usually do. If that failed, a flash of imperious will.

But this situation had got beyond her. The deference these young fellows had paid her was gone. She had

been pushed out of their minds by the thrill of the man hunt. In their voices she could hear the rough snarl of the wolf pack. It frightened her to learn that her opinion and her desire counted for nothing with them. She was only a woman, and it was a man's world.

The attackers were at a disadvantage in one respect. They could not set fire to the building and smoke out their victim. The property was too valuable. To storm the store would probably entail heavy loss, since he was well armed and would fight to the finish.

"We'll snipe him," Quinn announced. "But, first off, I'll have a talk with him an' give him a chance to surrender."

He asked Tilatha for her handkerchief to use as a white flag. She gave it to him.

"I'll go along," she said eagerly. "Maybe he'll listen to me."

"You'll stay right here," the shotgun messenger told her curtly.

As Quinn moved forward he shouted to the beleaguered man. "Say, fellow, I come for a powwow." He thrust his weapon into its holster.

"Don't make any mistake," the Texan advised him, his drawling voice cool and even. "This scatter gun shoots all over Arizona."

In spite of Russ Quinn's command, Tilatha had slipped forward at his heels. She could see Boone Sibley at the window, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. He was surrounded, caught in a trap, with no chance for escape. A hundred foes were clamouring for his blood. But never had she seen a man who looked more master

of his fate. In the grim face, with its tight, straight-lipped mouth and its cold steady eyes, there was no least flicker of panic.

"Fellow, you're bucked out," Quinn said arrogantly. "We got you right. But I'm givin' you a chance to surrender before we start shootin' you up."

"An' if I surrender, I'd be shot tryin' to escape on the way to Tough Nut. Much obliged. I reckon not. When I give myself up it will be to a sheriff with a warrant for my arrest. I'll make another proposition. Leave me go, an' I'll ride in to Tough Nut an' surrender."

"You got a consid'rable nerve, Texas man. How do I know you wouldn't light out for the line?"

"How do I know if I surrender I won't be shot down, anyhow?"

"I'm givin' you my word."

"I was givin' you mine."

"Hell, we got you, fellow. I'm offerin' terms, not you." Quinn's voice held the rasp of impatienc

"I wonder if you've got me, Mr. Quinn. I'm well fixed to send a few of yore friends to Kingdom Come first, anyhow. An' listen. You wished this on me. If I kill, I'm driven to it. I'm an American citizen attacked by a mob."

"You're the outlaw who killed Buck Galway, that's who you are!" the dark man cried angrily. "An' we're 'lowin' to collect yore hide *pronto*. You claim you're a bull rattler, eh? Watch us stomp you out."

Tilatha spoke pleadingly. Her confidence was gone. "If I rode along with you to Tough Nut would you surrender, Mr. Sibley?"

"No, ma'am, I would not," he answered curtly.

The sharp angry bark of a pistol rang out. Instantly the sawed-off shotgun swept up in an arc and boomed. A man crouched at a window of the Andrews store collapsed with a groan.

Quinn backed away. "Stay behind me, girl. What you here for, anyhow? Step lively. I'd beat the head off that fool who shot if he hadn't already got his."

The battle was on. Snipers from the cover of windows, walls, and street corners centred their fire on the store. The glass of the front was shattered. Tilatha could hear those in the rear pouring in their bullets. Occasionally the trapped man's guns flamed out defiance.

The heart died in her bosom. This could not last long. Some of these random shots would reach their mark.

She looked despairingly up the road. There was no sign of her brother, nor could there be for an hour. And what could Hugh do with this blood-mad mob?

Her eyes took in a landscape all colour, light, and air. The atmosphere was a rose-tinted haze. Lakes of lilac filled the mountain pockets, but the peaks had form without depth, an opalescence devoid of substance. Soon it would be night, and the desert would take on the softness laid on it by nature's magic wand.

Yet here, in this raw, ugly 'dobe village, the passions of men flung lances of death, forgetful of all the loveliness of life.

There must be some way to save him, if she could only think of it. She caught her hands together and looked up, perhaps to fling a prayer into the sky, and in that moment saw a gleam of hope. If they did not

kill him in the meantime, if some of them did not think of it first, if it could be done unnoticed, there was perhaps a chance for him to escape.

She prayed for darkness, that she might set about her preparations.

CHAPTER XVI

"LIKE BUZZARDS TO A WATER HOLE"

INSIDE the store Boone built what defences he could. Sacks of grain, piled against the lower window panes, reduced the area of attack. Barrels of nails helped to barricade the doors against the chance of being battered down. He could hear the spatter of bullets against the adobe walls, and could see the splinters they made as they tore through the doors. Looking out through his peepholes, he could count his attackers gathering.

"They're comin' like buzzards to a water hole in the spring," he said aloud.

As he saw it, night was his only chance. If he could survive until darkness fell, he might somehow contrive to slip away. In this frontier store he found plenty of ammunition and weapons, and he did not hesitate to avail himself of them. Through front and rear windows he fired a good many shots, but they were not intended to kill or even wound. If his foes came to close quarters with him, it would have to be different. Already he had dropped one man with a load of buckshot. That was enough for the present.

A bullet struck his left hand in the fleshy part just above the little finger. He tied up the wound with a handkerchief taken from stock.

Even during the battle, Boone found time once or twice to wonder what was back of this whole thing. He understood the attack. It was born of impulses easily comprehended, fusing into emotions of anger and greed. But why had the Quinns singled him out so instantly as the outlaw? Why had they instigated so big a reward as three thousand dollars *dead or alive?* No doubt the reward had come from the express company over the signature of the sheriff, but Boone did not doubt that the Quinns had urged it. And dead or alive. Did they prefer to have him brought in dead rather than alive? If so, why?

The Quinns had nothing serious against him. It was ridiculous to suppose that they were hounding him to his death merely because he had thrashed Curt French. The motive was not sufficient. Then what potent reason urged them?

The answer came like a flash of light. The Quinns were diverting suspicion. They were covering the tracks of the real robbers by throwing the blame upon him and Dusty Rhodes. There could be no other explanation. They had either robbed the Bisbee stage themselves, or else they knew who had.

Crouched between two dry-goods boxes, Boone listened to the spitting of the bullets as darkness fell. The fusillade had died down for the time. Only an occasional shot sounded. Were his enemies massing for a rush?

He rose to find out. As he did so, a tapping came from above. He looked up, revolver ready, to the skylight above.

"Mr. Sibley," a low voice whispered.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Me. Til McLennon. My pony is waiting beside the Silver Dollar. You can cross by the roofs and drop down." The girl's voice was tremulous with fear. "Oh, hurry, hurry!"

His thoughts moved in lightning flashes. Swiftly he caught up a Mexican sombrero and a serape from a shelf. A moment later he stood on one of the counters, stepped upon some sacks of flour, and pushed his head through the skylight. He lay beside the girl on the roof.

"Crawl along the roofs," she whispered. "You'll have to jump across to the Silver Dollar roof, then lower yoreself the other side. What's that?" She caught her hands in a gesture of terror.

There was a sound of crashing timber below, accompanied by fierce and savage voices.

"They're breakin' in," he cried.

Twice he had rejected harshly her mediation, once within the hour. He did not refuse her help now. She had brought him his one chance for life. He accepted it instantly.

But he did not creep along the roofs as she had suggested. He slipped the serape over his head and donned the sombrero, then ran from roof to roof. They were flat. Someone had caught sight of him and shouted. Her heart stopped as she saw him leap across to the Silver Dollar, stoop, and swing down from the roof.

"It's a Mexican," someone yelled. Then, "No, by cripes, it's the killer."

A shot sounded, another, three or four in quick suc-

cession. There came the swift drumming of hoofs. He had got away.

Cautiously a man's head and shoulders came through the skylight.

"Don't shoot," the girl cried.

"Til McLennon," a surprised voice ejaculated.

A moment later Sid Edwards stood beside her on the roof.

"What you doin' here?" he asked.

"Helpin' Mr. Sibley get away," she answered.

His jaw dropped. "Good Lord, girl! You might of got shot. How'd you get up here?"

"By the cottonwood tree over there."

Another man's head and shoulders showed, this time those of Russ Quinn. "Is he here, Sid?"

"Gone. Miss Tillie's here."

Quinn ripped out an oath. In three sentences the situation was explained to him. He relieved his feelings in harsh and unflattering words as he stood close to her, his sinewy fingers pressing into the flesh of her wrists.

She did not hear him. Her mind was with the man flying through the night. She had seen a bloodstained cloth around his hand. Was he badly wounded? Had he been hit again in the rush to escape? Had he escaped only to die of his hurts in the desert?

CHAPTER XVII

BOONE TAKES A LONG CHANCE

SWIFTLY Boone went from roof to roof, crouching as he ran. He leaped across to the one that covered the Silver Dollar and from the far side looked down. A man, revolver in hand, stood near the wall just below him. Twenty yards away, beneath a cottonwood, was a saddled pony.

The Texan did not take time to reason out his best course. Sure instinct guided him. He dropped from the roof upon the man below, who went down as though a hod of bricks had fallen on him.

As Boone clambered to his feet, he heard someone shout a warning. A gun barked in the darkness. The hunted man had no time for caution, none for retaliation. One wasted second might blot out his chance for escape. With long strides he scudded for the cottonwood. More guns sounded. Voices were lifted, shrill with excitement.

He caught at the bridle rein of the horse and vaulted to the saddle. One pressure of the knee was enough. He was astride a peg pony. It swung in its tracks and was off.

"Scratch gravel, you Billy boy," he murmured, his heart exultant.

For already he was out of range. In the night they

would never find him unless some pursuer stumbled on him by chance. Grimly he smiled. Already no doubt they were blaming one another bitterly for their failure to get him. He could imagine Russ Quinn's chagrin and humiliation. The man had been outlucked by his victim, outwitted by the girl he expected to marry. Unless Boone misread greatly his temperament, Quinn would take his setback as a personal affront.

Boone owed his escape wholly to Tilatha McLennon. Except for her interference, he would have been shot to death during the assault on the store. He recognized that fully. She had risked her life to save him. This did not hurt his pride. He exulted in it. If he had known in advance and could have prevented it, he would never have let her do it. Plainly enough he had told her to mind her own business. Her answer had been to plan his escape and to venture into the fire zone to save him. He would not soon forget the sight of her on the roof —fear-filled eyes shining with excitement, tremulous voice urging him to hurry, a young thing of unconscious grace whose slender throat carried the lovely head gallantly as the stem does a rose.

It was odd, this lift of the spirit, even though he had evaded the sharp menace of immediate death. A fugitive, he was riding from pursuit, already wounded, flying from danger into danger. That he was up to his neck in trouble, he knew. His only chance, any prudent man would say, was to head for Mexico and get across the line. There was in him some stubborn strain that would not let him do that. His intention was to ride to Tough Nut and face down his foes. Without a trial,

without waiting for the defence, public opinion had voted him guilty. If his enemies would give him time, he might reverse that verdict. A forlorn hope, he knew. It took no wisdom to perceive that they would strike hard and soon.

He rode through the night, following no trail but heading toward Tough Nut. A tenderfoot would soon have become lost in the maze of hills, but Boone had lived almost entirely in the open. The stars guided him, the general roll of the land told him which way lay the plains. A small stream confirmed his judgment.

At the creek he stopped to wash and bind his wounded hand.

"My luck sure stood up fine that time," he told himself, and he reknotted the handkerchief with the fingers of one hand and his teeth. "I reckon they spilled a couple hundred bullets at me. Never did see a burg get het up so sudden an' so unanimous."

Naturally at this point his thoughts reverted once more to the young woman who had starred in his rescue. They continued to dwell with her as he jogged on down the creek. He had not even had time to say "Much obliged." Did she think he was ungrateful? Maybe so, considering how he had previously repulsed so curtly her offers of assistance.

A gray light sifted into the sky. Dawn broke. It would not do to ride into Tough Nut in open daylight. There were arrangements to be made before he surrendered. He drew aside into the thick chaparral and unsaddled. He picketed the cow pony and let it graze on alfilaria. Boone had shot two quail at a water hole.

He dressed and cooked them, then stamped out the fire. The birds served him for breakfast.

Under the shade of a mesquite he slept, woke, and slept again, wearing the day away until after the sun had set. He had, as most riders of the plains have, a capacity for patience. He did not fret at the slow hours, nor did he let himself worry about the future. What would be would be.

As darkness began to fall, he saddled and took up again the road for town. When he reached Tough Nut he did not enter by way of Apache Street, nor did he put up Billy at the Buffalo Corral. Publicity was just now the last thing he wanted. He followed a burro trail that wound up an arroyo to a cabin on the outskirts of town. Not far from the cabin he dismounted and crept forward. There was a light in the shack, but before he announced himself he wanted to know whether the owner of the place was alone.

When he raised his head and looked through the window, his first glance told him there was only one person in the one-room house. Boone went to the door and knocked.

Mobeetie Bill opened to him. The old-timer's eyes could hardly credit what they saw. "Dog my skin, son, is it sure enough you?" he asked. "Come right in an' make yoreself to home."

"I'll look after my horse first," Boone said.

He unsaddled the cow pony and slipped the bridle from its head. Within a day or two he knew that the animal would be back at the McLennon ranch.

"You tell yore mistress that I'm right much obliged for the loan of you, Billy," the young man said aloud.

When Boone returned to the house, carrying saddle and bridle, he found that the old Texan had been busy. He was tacking a newspaper over the window.

"I reckon you've heard the news, some of it," Boone said. "I'm not figurin' on imposin' on you, not too much, anyhow. I've got no claim on you an'——"

"You have, too. You're from Texas, ain't you?"

"A heap of scalawags are from Texas, Dad. Well, I sure would like to talk things over with you if you've got no objections."

"You're gonna stay right here with me to-night. Had any supper?"

Boone had not. His host knocked together a hurried meal.

Before Boone washed his face he asked the old Texan the question that was heavily on his mind. "Have you heard about Dusty? Was he shot up bad?"

"In the laig. The boys will look after him all right. He's got friends aplenty. They say he's at the McLennon ranch."

The young man drew a deep breath of relief. "I was worried about him. The fellow that shot him was aimin' at me. Dusty crossed in front of me right then. That boy will sure do to ride the river with."

"A kinda nice kid. I'm glad it wasn't any worse." There was a gleam of sly humour in the old fellow's eyes. "He won't be stove up long. When he gets afoot again, they can bring him in an' hang him nice."

"Don't, Dad. You make my neck ache," Boone answered, with a rueful grin.

Mobeetie Bill emptied the contents of the frying pan into a plate. "Come an' get it, son," he said.

Not till after Boone had finished did either of them mention what was in both their minds.

The old man's eyes were shining with excitement. "Son, you've certainly done stood this town on its head. All kinds of stories are floatin' through the gambling halls. I reckon I'll know what's what quickest if you make oration whilst I listen. Hop to it, boy."

Boone told the story of what had occurred since he had left Tough Nut two days since. More than once the former buffalo hunter's toothless grin applauded him.

"Didn't have a thing to do with the Bisbee stage hold-up?" Mobeetie Bill asked.

"Not a thing. Something queer about that, Dad. Why wish it on me so immediate?"

The old fellow wrinkled his forehead, nodding his head slowly. "What I'd like to know, too. Someone mighty anxious to settle on a hold-up man real quick, looks like. Why? What was the doggone hurry?"

"You tell me, Dad. I know what I think."

"You think the same I do. The guys that did it were scared someone would strike the right trail, so they picked on you an' started folks lookin' for you. Funny the hold-ups were ridin' horses same colour as yores an' Curly."

"Unless they picked horses that colour because they knew the ones we were ridin'," Boone suggested.

"Hmp! Say, boy, that might be, too. I reckon I'll be right busy askin' a few questions to-morrow, or even to-night."

"I hoped you would."

"What about that wounded hand? You got to have a doctor."

"How about Dr. Peters? Is he a good doctor?"

"Why, he's a right good doctor, they say. But he might figure it his duty to tell the sheriff where you're at. He's got his own notions, Doc Peters has."

"I'll risk him. He doctored Curt French for the measles, didn't he?"

Mobeetie Bill was puzzled. He did not quite see what this had to do with it, but he could see by Boone's manner that there was some connection.

"Why, I dunno, did he? Want I should get Doc Peters here right away?"

"I hate to trouble you, Dad. If you don't want to mix up in this, I'll find him myself."

The old man exploded. "You leave me lay, boy. I'll do like I doggone please. I was totin' a gun before these Quinns were outa the cradle, an' I don't aim to git off'n the earth for the whole passle of 'em."

Boone smiled. "All right, Dad. It's yore say-so. Only ask yore questions careful. Don't get into a rumpus with these killers."

"Hmp! You're a nice fellow to be givin' advice like that," Mobeetie Bill grunted. "I been hearin' about all yore goings on in the hills. Beats me how you read yore title clear to talk thataway now."

"One thing kinda led to another, but I sure wasn't

lookin' for all the trouble that piled up on me. How much of a haul did the hold-ups get?"

"The express company ain't give out the figures, but I heard more'n twelve thousand."

Mobeetie Bill put on his coat and started on his errand.

Boone called after him. "Better not tell the doctor who his patient is."

"I been thinkin' that my own self," the old man replied.

CHAPTER XVIII

DOC PETERS CHANGES HIS MIND

DR. PETERS was a tall, thin man, very dignified. He wore an imperial but no moustache. As to clothing, he was fastidious.

Shrewd eyes under grizzled brows took in the Texan keenly. Apparently the doctor was a man of few words. After the briefest greeting, he removed his coat, folded it neatly, washed his hands, and examined the wound. He asked only one question.

"How long ago did this happen?"

Boone told him.

The doctor dressed the torn flesh, washed his hands a second time, and resumed his coat. He stood frowning down at his patient.

"How much?" asked Boone.

"No fee," answered the physician. "I regret to say, Mr. Sibley, that I find it my duty to report your presence in town to the authorities."

"You know me, then?"

"You were pointed out to me on the street some days ago."

"Fair enough, Doctor. You wouldn't want to take a fee from yore patient an' then sell him for three thousand pieces of silver, would you?"

The doctor flushed angrily. "I do not take blood money, sir, nor do I shield criminals."

"Meanin' me?" Boone asked, his voice low and even.

"I won't bandy words with you, young man. But I give you fair warning that I must notify the sheriff."

"You're playin' fair, Doctor. I expect you think I'll light out. Well, they'll find me here. What do you reckon I came back to town for?"

"I don't know, unless you're mad."

"Which I ain't." Boone leaned forward, an elbow on the table, his gaze plunged into the black eyes of the physician. "How far would you go, Doctor, to clear yore good name if it was attacked unjustly?"

The young man could see this sink in. He had given the doctor a jolt straight from the shoulder. It chanced that Joel Peters was an honourable man who very much valued his good repute.

"You mean you didn't rob the Bisbee stage and kill Buck Galway?"

"That's just what I mean. Dusty Rhodes an' I weren't within forty miles of the place when it happened. Don't know Dusty, do you, Doctor?"

"I've seen him."

"An' you think he's a wild young buckaroo ready for anything? Not for cold-blooded murder, Doctor."

"I understand the descriptions fit you both, even to the horses you were riding."

"Too closely. Someone kinda touched up the descriptions, I reckon. Someone left tracks, maybe, an' wanted it hung on someone else real *pronto*."

For a moment Dr. Peters was silent. "Young man, if you've got anything to say, I think you'd better say it without riddles. You have someone in mind, I take it," he said quietly.

"Correct, sir. But let me ask a question, first. Curt French was yore patient. He had the measles. Did you call on him that day? If so, when?"

Dr. Peters cast back to remember. "In the evening. He sent word to me not to disturb him in the morning because he wanted to sleep till afternoon."

"I'll bet he did his sleepin' on horseback, Doctor."

"Are you telling me that French robbed the stage?"

"Not for sure. I don't know yet, but I'm going to find out if I live long enough. Let's say he did, though, French an' one of his friends. We'll say the friend's last name was—well, call him Quinn. Though I wouldn't swear to it—might be Prouty, say. We won't give him a first name yet. Let's suppose there was a slip-up somewhere, an' they were worried for fear it might be laid to them. What would they do if they happened to know another man they could put it on, one they didn't like, anyhow?"

"As I understand it, this is all guess work on your part."

"Mostly. I saw they must have a reason for jumpin' on me so sudden an' so hard. Why three thousand dollars, *dead or alive*, before I got a chance to prove I didn't do it? Why put a name to the robbers only on suspicion? Ain't that some unusual, Doctor?"

Peters tugged at his imperial. "Yes, it is. And the

size of the reward. It surprised me. Why, too, such a difference in the price to be paid for you and for Rhodes?"

"Don't you reckon maybe they preferred me dead to alive? If I was dead, probably not many questions would be asked; but alive, I might be some inconvenient if I had a good alibi."

"You might, since you are the kind of a man you are." The doctor's eyes took in the lithe, muscular build of the man, the easy poised alertness of his stance. They passed to the face, cut as it were out of granite, lit by cold gray eyes, steady and hard as steel. There was intrepid force in him, either for good or for evil. Peters prided himself on being a judge of character. Sibley might be a killer, but he had the unshaken nerves that would keep him from fool murder when there was no necessity to slay. The shooting of Buck Galway had been wanton. It had been done, Peters believed, either by a man in drink or by one in panic. "What do you expect to do here, Mr. Sibley? Do you know that your life isn't worth a jackstraw if your enemies stir up the town against you?" he asked.

"I could guess that after the rehearsal they put on at Galeyville. I've got to take my chances. I'm here to give myself up to the sheriff, but I aim to round up what evidence I can first. Mobeetie Bill is out now, kinda puttin' a few casual questions for me. Let me ask you one, Doctor. Do the Quinns an' their friends own this town? Can they put over anything they like, no matter how raw?"

The doctor considered this before he answered. "Yes

and no. They are bold ruffians. I've known them disregard the opinion of the better part of the community. But Whip, who is their leader, plays a wary game. He usually moves under cover of the law. It would not be good for business to outrage public sentiment."

"An' how about the sheriff? Is he a Quinn man?"

"No, he isn't. It's a fee office and worth a lot of money. Whip Quinn wanted it, but the Governor appointed Brady. I don't think the feeling between the sheriff and the Quinns is friendly, though there has been no open break. My judgment is that Brady is an honest man."

"But he offers three thousand dollars' reward for a man dead or alive before the man has been proved guilty."

"If you knew Brady you could understand that. He's slow—rather thick-headed, in fact. The express company offers the reward through the sheriff's office. Dugan probably talked him into it. Dugan is the local manager of the express company, and he is a great admirer of the Quinns, Whip in particular."

There was a knock on the door, a loud rap, and two softer ones, after a pause.

"Mobeetie Bill," said Boone.

He opened the door to the old man.

"Well, Doc, how's yore patient?" the old-timer asked. "I done told that fool boy he deserves to have his head shot off instead of his hand if he monkeys with onloaded sixshooters."

"Dr. Peters knows who I am, Dad," explained Boone. "How did you come out?"

The ex-buffalo hunter glanced at the doctor, then

looked at Sibley. He understood that he was to tell what he had found out.

"Curt French an' Sing Elder rode outa town right after you boys, maybe a half hour later. They rode horses the same colour as you an' Dusty. Curt had been drinkin' some an' had a bottle with him. I got it from Mack Riley, who is swampin' for Reynolds down at the Buffalo Corral. Mack says they didn't git back whilst he was on duty. They said they were deputies for Bob Hardy on official business which was private an' not to be discussed. Curt did most of the talkin', seems. About the time I'd got that much outa Mack, he suspicions somethin' an' shuts his trap. Mack ain't lookin' for any trouble."

"You got a lot more from him than I expected you would. We're on the right track, looks like. Much obliged, Dad."

The old man grinned his toothless smile. "You don't owe me a thing, Texas man. It would be a pleasure to help hogtie Mr. Curt French with evidence he did this."

"I expect Curt did the killin'. They say he's a terror when he's drunk. Sull an' mean. What do you think, Doctor?"

Peters did not commit himself. "I think you had better go slow, Mr. Sibley. Your enemies are likely to move with deadly swiftness if they discover you are here and on their trail. My advice is to send for Mr. Turley and give him the facts. The *Gold Pocket* has much influence with the sober citizens of Tough Nut. If it indorses you, a counter sentiment will be started in your favour."

"Tha's sure enough good medicine," Mobeetie Bill agreed. "I'll see Turley to-night."

"I'll drop in on him," the doctor promised. "I think what I have to say might have weight with him."

Boone made a stipulation. "Tell him not to do or say anything that might get him into trouble with the Quinns. He's not a fightin' man and ought to be careful."

"He's a fighting man, though not with guns," the doctor corrected. "I'll carry your message, but he will do what he thinks right regardless of personal consequences."

Bag in hand, the doctor departed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE QUINNS DELIVER AN ULTIMATUM

DR. PETERS found Turley setting the story of the Galeyville fight. His wound had been slight, and already he was back at the office. The two men were friends and cronies, so the editor merely motioned his visitor to a chair covered with newspapers. He did not feel it necessary to desist from work.

They were alone, both the pressman and the editor's assistant having finished for the night. Dr. Peters lighted a pipe, strolled up and down the office, then sat down.

"Just got back from a visit to a patient," he said presently.

"If someone is sick, that is probably a story," Turley said.

"Even if he has been shot?" asked Peters, a twinkle in his eyes.

Turley stopped to look at him. "Someone else been shot?"

"Not someone else." Casually the doctor added, "Have you written the Galeyville fight story?"

"Just setting it now."

"I can give you a line to add to it. Mr. Boone Sibley is paying a short visit to Tough Nut."

"What!" Turley stared at his friend.

The doctor nodded confirmation of his news. "As the guest of our esteemed fellow citizen Mobeetie Bill," he appended, by way of footnote.

"What is he doing here?"

"Come to give himself up to the sheriff."

"Claims he is innocent, I suppose?"

"Claims to be—and I think is."

"Tell me all about it, Joel," the editor said.

Peters told the story briefly, without ornamentation. Much of it Turley already knew, for the accounts of Miss McLennon's rescue and of the subsequent Galeyville battle had been brought to him by several parties. The new angle to it was Boone Sibley's point of view and the discovery made by Mobeetie Bill.

The editor thumped his fist down on a table. "I never was satisfied with the story given out. I don't know why, but I had a feeling inside facts were being held back. Then, too, I know young Rhodes. He is wild, but there is a long jump between that and cold-blooded murder."

"You met Sibley. How did he impress you, Thomas?"

"Of course, I was predisposed in his favour," the editor said in his clipped precise way. "Naturally, one would be in the case of one who has saved one's life. But I watched this young man. He is strong and reserved. He knows his own mind and goes his own way. That rescue of the McLennon girl—I'd expect that sort of thing from him. But I wouldn't expect him to hold up a stage and murder a decent man like Buck Galway."

"Nor I. It would not be in character—at least, as I

read the man. He's a fighting Texan, but I think he would fight fair."

The eyes of the editor were shining. "Joel, I'm coming out flatfooted for him. Read to-morrow's paper. I'll say editorially that the *Gold Pocket* believes he is being persecuted and that he is an innocent man."

"Go slow, Thomas," advised his friend. "Don't make any references that point to the Quinns. Be very careful."

The door of the office opened, and two men walked in. They were Whip Quinn and Bob Hardy.

"Feelin' all right again, Mr. Turley, after Curt's fool gun play? I expect Doc here has fixed you up good," Whip said genially.

"I am very much improved, thank you," the editor said stiffly.

"Fine. Glad to hear it. I certainly read Curt the riot act for his foolishness. I told him he'd ought to apologize, but you know Curt. At heart one of nature's noblemen, but gnarly as an old apple tree."

"I know him," Turley said drily, without editorial comment.

"Well, I'm glad you're up an' about again practically good as new. All's well that ends thataway, as the old sayin' is. We got to take men as we find 'em, I suppose. Curt is a leetle too generous with his lead pills once in a while."

The editor had nothing to say in words, but his silence was eloquent. Presently he would find out the object of this call. He knew that Quinn had not come because of any social impulse.

Bob Hardy, impatient of diplomacy, came bluntly to the issue of the day. "You've been shoutin' for law an' order, Turley. Now you got a chance to come out flat-foot an' denounce this fellow Sibley. We're expectin' the *Gold Pocket* to be there both ways from the ace."

Whip put the matter more smoothly. "Like you say, Mr. Turley, this town an' county has to stop lawlessness. A killing here or there—well, that's to be expected. But robbin' stages an' shootin' shotgun messengers hurts the town. I reckon Sibley is safe in Mexico by now, but it won't hurt to hand him one of yore well-known editorial scorchers. Show other outlaws where we're at, for one thing."

Turley gathered his courage for the stand he must take. His slender body grew rigid, his throat dry.

"I—I don't believe Sibley is an outlaw, Mr. Quinn. We're not after the right man."

"What!" Whip Quinn flashed his hard eyes on the editor. "Not the right man? Do you claim to have some information we haven't got? If so, spit it out."

"No information." Turley swallowed a lump in his throat and went on timidly: "But I know Dusty Rhodes. He is not that kind of young man."

"We'll go easy on Dusty. This Sibley led him into it."

"But did he? I can't think so. I feel——"

Bob Hardy broke in roughly: "It don't matter what you feel. We've made up our minds. This fellow did it. It goes as it lays."

Once more the other found a more diplomatic way

to apply pressure. "You don't want to let yore personal gratitude to this killer stand in the way of the town's good, Mr. Turley. I was on the ground with the marshal here, after the crime. We looked into the evidence. It pointed straight to Sibley. Why did he resist arrest at Galeyville? Why did he shoot Jim Barkalow there? Why did he light out after he got away? Where's he at now?"

Turley tugged nervously at his moustache. He felt that he was being driven toward disaster, but if he let himself be bullied into submission he would always despise himself.

"Probably he lost his head at Galeyville. They were shooting at him. He had no chance to surrender. He was fighting for his life."

"He did, too, have a chance to give up. Russ put it up to him, an' he come back by takin' a shot at him. If yore paper stands back of this Texas wolf, Turley——"

Bob Hardy did not finish his sentence, but the black look that went with it was a threat, a savage and ruthless one.

The editor felt his stomach muscles let go, as though his vitals had become cold lead. His heart died within him.

"Bob is right," the other man agreed, his mouth tightening grimly. "You can't throw down this town because you're thick with this bad man Sibley. Not for a minute, you can't."

"It's not only my personal gratitude, Mr. Quinn. If I thought he was guilty the *Gold Pocket* would certainly say so. But I can't feel that he is."

For the first time Dr. Peters spoke. "Nor I," he said quietly.

"Are you in this, Doc?" Bob Hardy asked roughly.

"Who do you think did it, Doctor?" Whip asked, dangerously suave.

"Haven't the least idea. Might have been some cowboys from the hills. Might have been someone from Bisbee."

"It was two fellows from right damned here. One was this Texas warrior Sibley, the other was Dusty Rhodes." The older man looked hard at the editor. "Don't make any mistake, Turley. Get this in yore paper correct."

"It will be true as I see it," the newspaper man said. He was white as a sheet, but he looked straight at Quinn.

"If I was you, I'd see it right. This town won't stand for you aidin' and abettin' an outlaw like Sibley," warned Whip.

"You'll shoot off yore mouth onct too often," Bob added harshly. "We're plumb tired of you runnin' on us. Me, I've had aplenty."

"Don't make a mistake, Turley," Whip advised once more, a dark warning in his voice. "Like Bob says, you've been on the prod with us aplenty."

With which the men turned and left the office.

CHAPTER XX

"SHERIFF, SHAKE HANDS WITH MR. SIBLEY"

QUINN and Hardy left behind them in the office of the *Gold Pocket* two men wretchedly downhearted. Neither spoke for a few moments. Each of them knew that an ultimatum had been served, that there was danger ahead if Turley opposed the killers.

"They have their necks bowed, Thomas," Peters said ruefully.

The editor nodded, swallowing hard. His lips were gray, his face bloodless.

"You've got no proof that Sibley is innocent. Better drop it. That is what he says himself—Sibley, I mean. He told me to tell you to keep out of this," the doctor continued.

"I can't," said Turley miserably. "These ruffians must not dictate the policy of the paper. I'm a coward, God knows, but—I've got to draw the line somewhere. I can't take orders from them—not and call myself a man."

Peters spoke to his friend, his voice very gentle. "Thomas, you are not called upon to—to do this thing for a town that wouldn't even understand why you did it. These ruffians have an argument reason can't op-

pose. You are not in Massachusetts. The sixshooter is mightier than the pen out here. I advise you to make no editorial comment whatever about this business."

"And this is free America, Joel," the harassed man said bitterly. "To save my skin, I'm to kowtow to these scoundrels. I won't do it."

"Why raise the point of Sibley's innocence, since you have no evidence of it? At least wait—see what developments occur."

"I must talk with him—to-night."

The door of the office opened. A girl walked into the room swinging a sunbonnet. She was a slender but rounded little thing. In age she might have been nineteen, in spite of her diminutive stature. But childhood still caressed the blooming cheeks, the golden hair, the small animated face.

"You're working too late, Uncle Tom," she said as she came forward, and there was the caress of the eternal mother in her voice. "You look all tired out. I won't have it."

She smiled at Dr. Peters. Small white teeth, strong and even, gleamed between the red lips. The doctor was old enough to be her father, but the long-lashed blue eyes made their soft appeal to him. Eve Turley could no more help it than she could help breathing. She did not mean any harm. She never did. If she was a coquette, it was by instinct rather than design.

The eyes of the two men grew tender as they looked at her. Most men felt that she needed protection and were moved by chivalrous impulse to see that she had it.

"You ought not to have come here alone," her uncle reproved.

"It was such a teeny way," she protested, smiling at him. "And I didn't come alone. Colin brought me. He's outside."

"Tough Nut is a wild town, my dear, not like one of our villages at home."

"Yes, but I'm going to love it, dear. I'm so glad I came."

Eve had been in Tough Nut only two days. Her lungs were thought to be delicate, and her mother had sent her out to see what the dry sun-kissed Arizona air would do for them. Her uncle had moved into a larger house the day before her arrival.

Turley rose to accompany her home. She found his crutch and offered him the support of her slim shoulder on the other side. The house they had taken was scarcely a hundred yards from the office. The editor limped the distance, his friend on one side and Eve on the other.

"He's lots better. Isn't he, Doctor?" the girl said.

She did not know he had been shot. The story given her was that he had fallen and strained a ligament.

Eve went in to light the lamp, and the two men lingered on the porch.

"Shall I bring Sibley around to see you?" Peters asked.

"I wish you would. I'd like to hear what he has to say."

"I've been wondering if it would not be a good thing to sound Brady out. We do not need to tell him at first

that Sibley is here, only that we have reason to think he may not be guilty of the stage robbery."

"Perhaps you are right. I've got to line up what strength we have if I'm going to stand out against the Quinns. Brady would be reasonable, though he won't come out definitely on our side. But let me talk with Sibley first."

Half an hour later Eve answered a knock on the door to let in Dr. Peters and two other men. One of these was a leather-faced old man. The other was a tall, brown young athlete who carried his lean, trim body lightly and gracefully. He did not look at all like the young men she had known in Massachusetts, nor did he act like them. For one thing, though her eyes had fallen full in his, he gave no evidence that he knew he was meeting a very pretty girl. She did not remember ever having seen anybody whose gaze was so hard and cold. Her uncle introduced the strangers as Mobeetie Bill and Mr. Sibley, then suggested with a smile that since she must be tired after her long day they would excuse her if she wished to go to bed.

Eve did not want to go to bed. She wanted to stay and make eyes at this remarkable young man who did not seem to have the least interest in her. She was skilled in ways to thaw out even as icy a youth as this one. But she could not very well insist on staying.

She said good-night prettily, pouting a little, just enough to make her Cupid's bow mouth irresistible. Then, flashing her dewy-eyed smile at all present, she departed, light-footed and swift.

"She's sure a right peart young lady," Mobeetie

Bill said inadequately. Then, with his toothless grin, he added: "Some of the lads are liable to notice her, don't you reckon, Mr. Turley?"

"I gather there is a young man back at Harvard," the editor said, smiling.

"If the young fellows out here are like they was in my time, they'll sure give him a run for his money," the old fellow predicted.

"This is a council of war, gentlemen, to decide the best policy to pursue," Dr. Peters announced. "Shall I talk, Thomas, or will you?"

"Go ahead," Turley said.

Out of the ensuing conference came two decisions. The first was made by Turley: he would go through with the editorial policy of criticizing the attempt to find Sibley guilty before he had been tried. The second came from Sibley: Sheriff Brady was to be brought to the house and all the facts laid before him.

Mobeetie Bill found the sheriff playing poker at Dolan's Palace. Brady was winning, and he viewed sourly the old man's invitation to take a walk with him. The old-timer was insistent, and to get rid of him the sheriff left his chips to hold the seat and followed the Texan out of the house.

"Dad gum yore old hide, what's it all about?" the officer asked, not unamiably. He had not wanted to leave the table, but now he had come he was in no hurry. The game would go on all night and perhaps all the ensuing day.

"I said for you to take a walk with me, Brady. We ain't took it yet."

"Mostly I do my walkin' in a saddle, Dad. What in Mexico has got in yore old coconut? Is it officially you want me?"

"You're liable to find out when we get there. What's eatin' you, anyhow? Won't anyone steal yore measly li'l' stack of chips."

"You're sure mysterious to-night, Dad, an' you the gabbiest galoot that ever come a-runnin' outa Texas ahead of a sheriff. Hmp! I recollect onct findin' a buffalo skull on the old Chisum trail. It had wrote on it, 'Talked to death by Mobeetie Bill.' They had stuck it up for a marker on the poor pilgrim's grave."

Turley admitted the two men to the room where the others were waiting. The sheriff glanced around carelessly.

"Hello, Doc! How's every little thing? This old donker drug me away from a poker game. Were you figurin' on startin' one here?"

"Not exactly. Sheriff, shake hands with Mr. Boone Sibley."

The smile vanished from Brady's wrinkled brown face like the light from a blown candle. The starch of wariness ran through him instantly and tensed his figure. He waited silently, watching the young Texan with steady, appraising eyes.

"Don't drop jokes like that around, Doc. They're liable to go off an' hurt someone," he warned.

The sheriff had spoken to the doctor, but his gaze did not for an instant release Sibley.

Boone nodded his head. "No joke at all, Sheriff I'm the man you want."

"Who took you? How come you here?"

"Nobody took me. I came to surrender myself because I hear I'm wanted."

The officer stared at him, dumb with amazement. His mind grappled with the situation and could find no light. If this was the bandit Sibley, what crazy scheme had brought him straight to the vengeance awaiting him?

"Surrender yoreself?" the sheriff repeated at last.

"Yes. To clear my name. To prove I didn't do it."

"Not hold up the stage?"

"And to find out, if I can, who did do it."

"You got me whipped," the sheriff said. "Why, you damn fool, you've been identified, practically. You haven't got a dead man's chance."

"Who identified me, Sheriff?" Boone asked.

"One of the hold-ups was about the size of Dusty Rhodes, an' he wore chaps an' a brown shirt like they claim Dusty was wearin' when he left here. He was on a bay horse."

"You ever wear a brown shirt an' ride a bay horse, Sheriff!"

"Might have done so, but not last Tuesday. The other hold-up, the one that did the killin', was taller than his friend. He rode a sorrel."

"As I did," Boone added. "Bay an' sorrel are right frequent colours for horses. I know two other fellows left here Tuesday mornin' mounted thataway."

"Who?" asked Brady.

"Comin' to that soon. Ain't that kinda slim identi-

fication, Sheriff, for a reward of three thousand, dead or alive?"

"Whip Quinn an' Bob Hardy talked with the passengers. They sure enough described a man like you."

"I'll bet they did—after Quinn had described me to them first. Did it ever strike you that this was wished on me an' Dusty too sudden? That someone was mighty eager to elect us by unanimous consent with a hurrah?"

"Got any alibi?"

"We have an' we haven't. About the time the stage was being held up we met two old prospectors headin' for the Dragoons. Dusty was acquainted with 'em. One he called Toughfoot Bozeman an' the other Hassayampa Pete."

"Where was this?"

"A few miles this side of Sugarloaf Peak."

"What time of day, did you say?"

"About ten o'clock, I reckon."

"That sure lets you out if they back what you say. I'll send someone out after the old donkers."

Boone, in his soft drawl, raised a point. "Talkin' about alibis, I wonder what kind of a one Curt French an' Sing Elder would offer."

The sheriff's eyes clamped to his. "Meanin' just what?"

"I'm interested about how they would explain their little *pasear* if anyone asked them. They left town Tuesday mornin' half an hour after Dusty an' me. French rode a sorrel. Sing Elder was on a bay. Sing is some shorter than his friend."

"Where did they go?"

"That's what I'm wonderin'. Yore guess is as good as mine."

"Got any proof of this?"

"Mack Riley. He's swampin' at the Buffalo Corral. Mack says French had been drinkin' an' had a bottle with him. French said they were deputies of Bob Hardy on official business an' for Riley not to say anything about them leavin' town."

"French had the measles," Dr. Peters added. "I was attending him. He sent word to me that morning not to come to see him as he wanted to sleep. Bob Hardy brought me the message and asked if I would call after supper instead. Quinn came to me long after French and Sing Elder had left town—that is, if it is true what Riley says."

"Hmp! Looks right queer." The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "When did they get back to town?"

"We don't know," Peters replied. "Not till after Riley was off duty. He went off about four in the afternoon."

Brady muddled it over in his mind. If the Quinn outfit had done this and had used him to further their plans, if they were laughing up their sleeves at him for a chuckle-headed rabbit, he would show them a thing or two before he got through. Anger simmered in him. Whip had flattered him for his prompt action in issuing the reward. Why had he taken the trouble to do this? What did he care whether the bandits were caught? Unless he had a personal interest in it. Come to think of it, the stage was never held up when Russ Quinn was the shotgun messenger. Nor was it robbed unless

there was a gold shipment aboard. It looked as though there was a leak of information somewhere. In that case, the robbers must live in Tough Nut and must be close to the company. Whip was a boon companion of Dugan, the local manager of the express company. Very likely Dugan was not in on the robberies. He was a vain little man who took much pride in being the friend of the great Whip Quinn. It would be easy enough for Whip to get out of him casually what he wanted to know, especially since Russ was employed in a confidential capacity by the company.

The longer Brady thought about it the more convinced he became that the Quinns or some of their friends were at the bottom of the robberies. His anger against them mounted. They had chosen him as their monkey, had they, to draw the chestnut out of the fire for them? He would show them whether they could make a fool of him. But he must go slow. He must not take it for granted that this Texan was innocent.

"Since you claim you're innocent, why didn't you surrender peaceable at Galeysville?" Brady asked.

"They began shootin' at me, first off. Later, I wouldn't surrender to Russ Quinn because I figured I would never reach town alive."

"You wouldn't have, either, not if what you say about the bandits being fellows close to the Quinns is true. But folks are all het up about you shootin' Buck Galway an' then that cowboy Barkalow."

"Is Barkalow dead?"

"No, sir. He's got better than an even break to live, I hear. But that ain't yore fault."

"Nor his," the Texan added. "I can prove he fired at me while Quinn was talkin' to me under a flag of truce."

"Maybeso. P'int is that folks ain't in a mood to listen to any of yore explanations. You're a regular Billy the Kid. So they think. Their notion is that the sooner you're bumped off the better it will be for all concerned. I'll have to arrest you, Mr. Sibley."

"I've ridden fifty or sixty miles to give you a chance, Mr. Sheriff," the young man answered, a faint ironical drawl in his voice.

"I reckon I'll play my hand close to my belly till I find where we're at. No use tellin' the Quinns where you are. I'm arrestin' you for stealin' a horse up at Prescott. Yore name is Jack Blayney, if anyone asks you."

"I'll remember that."

"Now, I'll take yore guns, Mr. Sibley, if you please."

The Texan handed over his sixshooters. "Mr. Blayney, you mean," he corrected with a smile.

CHAPTER XXI

TURLEY PASSES THE BUCK

TOUGH NUT buzzed like a beehive with whispered comment. Women gossipped and men hazarded surmises as to future developments. The *Gold Pocket* had come out editorially in defence of the accused men Sibley and Rhodes. Its story of the battle at Galeyville did not carry the slant hitherto given the affair. According to the newspaper account, the two men had been fired upon without warning and Rhodes wounded. The Texan had defended himself, one against fifty. He had shot Barkalow only after the cowboy had violated a flag of truce by firing at him. Eventually he had escaped only because a young woman whom he had rescued from a band of Mexicans a day or two earlier had risked her life to save him.

As to the attack upon the stage, the editor of the *Gold Pocket* said the accused men, so at least one of them claimed, could establish an alibi, if given time. The paper advocated patience on the part of the citizens of the town and county. Facts were likely to develop within a day or two that would entirely change the present outlook. Precipitate action of any kind, such as had occurred at Galeyville, was to be deplored.

Those who had inside information saw, both in story and in editorial, a challenge to the Quinns. Bob Hardy,

deputy United States marshal, had with Whip Quinn taken charge of the hunt for the bandits. They had followed the trail into the hills and lost it. They had interviewed passengers on the stagecoach and obtained descriptions of the robbers. On their advice a reward had been offered for Sibley and Rhodes. Whip's brother Russ had taken command of the cowboys in the Galeyville attack.

"It's a Quinn proposition from start to finish," a miner at Dolan's Palace said to another. "They've got it hung on Dusty an' this Sibley. Prob'ly they've got the right guys. Where did this Texas man hail from, anyhow? Nobody knows. But we're sure he's a tough son-of-a-gun. That's been proved aplenty. Turley had ought to know the Quinns ain't gonna be pleased for him to try to give 'em the laugh by claimin' they don't know what they're doing."

"Turley is too biggity. He wants to run this yere town like a Sunday school. Then, when we have a cold-blooded murder, he sticks up for the guy because the fellow done him a good turn. Or maybe he's hired to, I dunno."

These represented fairly enough the casual opinion of Tough Nut, but there were those who believed the Quinns had a much more urgent reason for resenting the articles in the *Cold Pocket*. One of the latter was Sheriff Brady, now riding doggedly toward Bisbee after a rather active night spent not at poker. Another was a young man in jail charged with stealing a horse at Prescott. Dr. Peters and Mobeetie Bill were two others. And Mack Riley, at the Buffalo Corral, began to be

uncomfortably aware that something serious was in the air and to wonder if he had talked too much with his mouth.

It was observable that at Jefford's, at the Last Chance, at the Occidental, and at other gambling houses men began to gather in knots to discuss the affair. In each group was one positive individual who sawed the air with forceful gestures. It might be Curt French. It might be a Quinn. It might be some one of their hangers-on. But the purport of the argument was always the same. The time had come to show Turley where to get off at. He was standing up for criminals and cold-blooded murderers, and he ought to be tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. The more excited the orators became the more necessary it was to wet the throat with another drink all around. Each drink called for more heated vituperation.

Meanwhile, Whip and Russ Quinn walked down to the newspaper office. An itinerant printer who was cleaning type told them that the boss was out. Perhaps he was at his house. The Quinns went to Turley's home and found him there. But not alone.

With him was a very pretty young blonde whom he introduced as his niece. Two visitors from the hills were also present. "I think you know Mr. and Miss McLennon," the editor added.

The editor's heart melted within him. Had the Quinns come to exact vengeance upon him for his defiance of their warning?

"Yes, we know 'em," Russ said harshly, his eyes fastened to those of Tilatha. "Be glad to smoke 'em

out right here an' find where they're at. Do you claim you're friends? Or ain't you?"

Hugh spoke evenly. "Just as friendly as we ever were, Russ."

"Don't look like it, the way this fool girl acted at Galeyville."

"What would you expect?" asked Hugh, a suggestion of the grating of steel in his voice. "Sibley saved Til from those Mexicans. Wouldn't you figure she'd do him a good turn if the chance came?"

Whip took the answer quickly out of his brother's mouth. "Of course. Russ is sure sore the fellow got away. Can't blame him. But we don't aim to have any trouble with you because Miss McLennon was some too impulsive. We're here to ask Mr. Turley some questions."

"G-glad to answer any," the editor said in a fading voice.

"First off, what d'you mean by claimin' this Sibley was in the right at Galeyville?" The voice of the older Quinn stung like a whip lash.

"Why, my information—if I'm wrong I'll be glad to correct what I wrote—but Miss McLennon was there —and——"

"Does she say there wasn't a reward out for this killer, dead or alive?"

"She can speak for herself," Tilatha answered. "She says they never gave him or Dusty a chance to surrender before they began firing at them."

"Didn't Russ give him a chance afterward?"

"Yes, an' while they were talking, Jim Barkalow

fired at Mr. Sibley. He was afraid they'd kill him if he did surrender."

"He was thinkin' about what he did to Buck Galway. That's why he didn't surrender," Russ broke in savagely.

"My notion, too," his brother agreed. "But pass that. Another question, Mr. Turley. Is it Dusty or this other killer that claims they've got an alibi? An' when did he claim it?"

"Miss McLennon says——"

"Passin' the buck again," Whip interrupted grimly. "Well, what does Miss McLennon say this time?"

"Dusty told me, Mr. Quinn," Tilatha replied, "that they met two old prospectors in the desert just about the time the stage was robbed."

"An' who were these prospectors?"

The hill girl caught the flash of warning in the editor's eye. "He didn't give their names. They were going into the Dragoons, they said," was her answer.

"About like I expected. He had to claim something, didn't he?"

The girl's spirit flashed to expression. "I don't care. I believe every word he says. They didn't do it."

She thought Whip Quinn's smile hateful. It implied much more than it said, more than he would have dared say in words. Beneath the tan, colour flamed into her cheeks. Yet there was no answer she could make, not without giving him more excuse to believe his unspoken accusation.

He turned again to the editor. "What facts are likely to develop that will change the present situation as re-

gards this killer Sibley? Just what did you mean by yore editorial?"

Turley tugged at his moustache helplessly. He dared not let Whip think for a moment that the Quinns or their followers were suspected. A moment of inspiration saved him. "Why—about the alibi—it's likely to be established when word reaches the prospectors, don't you think?"

"No, by God, I don't." Whip brought his big fist down on the table like the blow of a hammer. "I think you've thrown in with those road agents. That's what I think. This fellow Sibley, an' Dusty Rhodes, too, was at yore house the night of his run-in with Curt French. Did you fix it up then that if they didn't make a clean getaway after they robbed the stage you was to claim in yore paper they were innocent?"

"You don't mean that—seriously?" the newspaper man gasped.

"It's ridiculous—and hateful—to say that about my uncle," Eve cried, her blue eyes flashing fire. "As though—as though he were a robber."

"He's tryin' to protect one—a robber an' a murderer both," the younger Quinn answered.

"That's not true, Russ Quinn," Tilatha flung back at him. "He's neither one nor the other. Why are you all so anxious to condemn Boone Sibley without giving him a chance? What harm did he ever do you?" Her stormy eyes challenged the angry ones of Russ.

"Looks thataway to me, too, boys," Hugh said amiably enough. He had no wish to quarrel with the Quinn crowd. That would be both dangerous and unprofit-

able. "You're sure enough barkin' up the wrong tree. I reckon Sibley has lit out for good. But Dusty is still with us. Fact is, he's at the ranch now. Give him a chance to prove his alibi. Won't do any harm, will it?"

"Nor any good," Whip retorted. "I worked up this case myself, me an' Bob. Real thorough, too. D'you think we're fools, McLennon?" Abruptly he turned to Turley. "Look out for yoreself. We've protected you up to date. But no more. If the citizens of this town through a law-an'-order committee take action, don't blame us."

He turned on his heel and strode out of the room. Russ frowned at Tilatha. He hesitated, as though he were about to say something, then closed his mouth like a steel trap and followed his brother.

Eve turned to her new friend Tilatha McLennon. She was puzzled and disturbed. Half an hour ago, she had heard for the first time that her uncle had been wounded by a drunken bully. These black Quinns were threatening him again. The community to which she had come seemed to be a resort of thieves and murderers.

"Isn't it dreadful?" she murmured. "I—I never heard of such things before."

"What did they mean about a law-and-order committee?" Turley asked McLennon.

The ranchman shook his head. "No idea what he meant. Maybe just tryin' to scare you."

Turley thought that if that was what Quinn wanted he had certainly succeeded. If any law-and-order committee waited on him, he knew that Whip Quinn would be back of it. They would do what he told them to do

yet he would not be responsible for their actions in the eyes of the community. What did law-and-order committees do to their victims? Did they hang them? Or did they merely beat them with whips till they wished they were dead?

CHAPTER XXII

BOONE GETS BACK HIS SIXSHOOTERS

SHERIFF BRADY'S trip to Bisbee did not unearth any important evidence, but it had the effect of disturbing some conclusions regarded as already established. The passengers could give no accurate description of the robbers. Buck Galway had been killed almost before the stage stopped. The effect of this had been to terrorize those on board. The big bandit, the noisy one who did the talking, handled his sixshooters so recklessly that they had been too frightened to make accurate observations. Moreover, most of the time they had been lined up with their backs to the road agents.

Before leaving for Bisbee the sheriff had made a discovery of interest. The day after the hold-up, Curt French had bought at the leading jewellery shop in Tough Nut a diamond pendant, presumably for a sporting lady named Faro Kate in whom he was interested. He had paid for it with greenbacks. The significance of this lay in the scarcity of paper money on the frontier. It was practically never used in Tough Nut. A strange coincidence was that one of the passengers on the stage, a New Yorker, had been relieved of six hundred dollars in bills.

In the jail yard Brady hitched his horse and knocked

the dust from his hat. He bowlegged in to his office. Two old-timers were making themselves at home there. Both were smoking corncob pipes. One was laboriously reading a newspaper to the other.

"The king at present on the thorn sits in-se-cure-ly. No, Pete, I reckon it ain't 'thorn'—must be 'throne,' don't you reckon?"

Brady guessed what they were doing here, but he did not give them a lead. "Thought you old vinegaroons were out prospectin' in the Dragoons," he said.

"We was headed thataway, but seems like one thing an' another is always comin' up," Hassayampa Pete complained.

"Fellow told us how Dusty Rhodes an' another gazebo held up the Bisbee stage Tuesday," Toughfoot Boseman explained querulously.

"That's what they say, about ten in the mo'ning."

"Well, they didn't. We met 'em out on the desert about that time up somewheres near Sugarloaf."

"Would you know the fellow with Dusty?"

"I ain't plumb blind, be I?" demanded Bozeman.

Five minutes later they confronted Boone Sibley.

"That's him—the fellow with Dusty," Pete snapped.

"Y'betcha!" corroborated his partner. "An' someone has sure got to pay us for the time an' trouble we've took to come to town."

"Reckon Mr. Sibley will be willin' to foot that bill," the sheriff said. "First off, though, we'll git yore story on paper an' witnessed. I'll ask you both to stick around town for a coupla days."

"Hmp! Mr. Sibley payin' for that, too?"

"I'll see you're paid," the sheriff promised.

After the prospectors had gone, the sheriff summarized the situation. "Well, Sibley, it looks like we ain't got a thing on you. Soon as you like you can walk outa that door."

"About that horse I stole up at Prescott," Boone drawled.

Brady grinned. "Mistaken identity. Turns out you ain't Blayney. Still an' all, I'd advise you to stay right here or light out pronto. Some up-an'-comin' lad might bump you off before I can get that reward withdrawn. Then there's the Quinns an' Curt French."

"That's good medicine, Sheriff. Since you're so hospitable I'll sleep in yore hotel to-night, anyhow. I'd hate to be shot for a reward that ain't."

"Make yoreself comfortable. I'll tell Hank you're yore own boss now."

The jailor, Hank Jacobs, offered his guest a cot downstairs in exchange for the cell he had been occupying.

"Glad you proved you wasn't the man," he said. "Horse stealin' in Arizona ain't no game for amachoors to buck."

"No business for a quiet, timid man like me," Boone agreed. "By the way, Sheriff, do I get my sixshooters back? Might run acrost a rattlesnake."

Brady handed the guns to him. "You be right careful how you use these, young fellow. Don't you go firin' them off promiscuous in this town. Well, I got to go home an' meet the wife. She claims she's a widow since I took this job. My own kids don't hardly know me."

Boone sat in an armchair in the sheriff's office and

read the newspaper. The jailor excused himself, retired to a back room, and prepared to make up arrears of sleep.

The young Texan read the advertisement offering a reward for him dead or alive. In a parallel column was the story of the Galeyville battle. It was written without colour or bias, but so vividly that he lived again the half hour before he was astride Billy galloping for the chaparral. On an inside was the editorial pleading for fair play.

"Dusty was right," Boone told himself. "Turley has got guts. He's sure the nerviest scared man I ever met. He's got no business in this town with the Quinns rampagin' around."

An hour passed. Boone had read even the patent medicine advertisements. He dropped the newspaper on the desk, leaned back, stretched his arms, and yawned to the bottom of his lungs. Time to turn in.

He chopped the yawn off unfinished, arms still extended. What was that noise? It sounded like the roar of surf. Then he knew. The night had become vocal with the growl of many voices drowning each other out. Boone rose, walked to the door, opened it, and stepped out.

Down the street, three hundred yards away, the road was filled with men. Others were pouring out from saloons and gambling houses. They were like busy ants swarming about.

Something was afoot.

A man hurried past. Boone called to him.

"What's up?"

"They're runnin' Turley outa town—gonna tar an' feather him first."

Boone asked no more questions. He knew why, just as he knew that the better element—nine tenths of the citizens of the town—would disapprove of such a lawless high-handed proceeding. The riff-raff and the ignorant were doing this, instigated by the Quinns, who very likely would stay in the background and laugh up their sleeves.

Already Boone was striding down the street. This was his business. It had been for espousing his cause that Turley had become the object of their wrath.

He began to run.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ROAR OF THE PACK

DURING the day Turley had heard rumbles of the coming storm. He was as uneasy as a man sitting on the edge of a volcano due to erupt any minute. Just before supper Dr. Peters came to him.

"I don't like the way things look, Thomas," he told his friend. "I don't want to alarm you, but there is trouble brewing. The sober people of the town will back your policy, but there are a lot of hoodlums and some thick-headed honest men ready for mischief. The whole gambling element is lined up against you. If I were you, I'd leave town at once, and stay away until the excitement has died down."

Turley shook his head. "Can't do that, Joel," he said, his voice heavy with gloom. "I've done nothing wrong. I won't run away like a cur."

"I would. Don't be obstinate, Thomas. It's the Quinns' work. Why oblige them by staying here and becoming a victim of it?"

"No. I won't go. Probably the whole thing will blow over, anyhow. I've put my hand to the plough. I'll stay."

Peters knew it was no use to argue with him. Besides, it was likely he was overestimating the danger. Perhaps the best way was to stay and face it down.

"I wish you had a bodyguard—someone like that Boone Sibley," he said.

The editor's answering smile held no mirth. "Do you know anyone looking for a job like that, with French and the Quinns and Sing Elder as my chief enemies? Not to mention that eminent peace officer Bob Hardy. If you meet such a man, please send him around. I'd like to see him, though I won't promise to hire him."

"At any rate, go armed."

"Why? I can't hit a barn door. It is known I don't carry weapons. That serves me as a protection."

"Did it help you when Curt French shot you?" Peters asked bluntly.

Turley found it difficult to eat his supper. Food stuck in his throat and choked him. He could hardly get it down. His mind was full of alarms. He found himself listening intently. For what?

Eve knew he was troubled, and in the world-old ways of women tried to distract him. She talked, cheerfully, with occasional chirrups in her voice like the notes of birds.

"I like Tilatha McLennon. Isn't Tilatha a funny name? It's so old-fashioned. I never met a girl like her. She's so—so Joan of Arc-ish, if you know what I mean. I wish I were like her. But I couldn't be, not in a thousand years. Wasn't it splendid the way she saved that solemn Mr. Sibley at whatever the name of the place is? Oh, I wish I were that kind of a girl. It's funny, too. She can do all sorts of things, they say. Shoot like a man. And ride a bucking bronco. But she's not a bit mannish. Back home she'd be a sensation with that glorious red

hair and those big eyes and that kind of easy grace with which she carries herself—regal, I guess you'd call it. But she wouldn't fit back there, either. She needs the hills and wide spaces and Arizona sunsets for a background. Don't you think so, Uncle dear?"

Turley brought himself back with a start. "Yes. Yes, indeed. Quite so." His voice quavered a little. He had heard, or thought he had, an unusual sound in the street.

"I asked Miss Peters about her. She isn't the kind of girl to talk about herself. Miss Peters says that one of the Quinns, the one they call Russ, will likely marry Tilatha. But I hope not. He isn't good enough for her. Do you know, dear, I wonder if she isn't in love with Mr. Sibley? Russ Quinn thinks so, too. That's why he hates him so much—one reason, anyhow. I watched him when he was talking to you. What's the matter?"

Turley had risen. Again she caught that look of intent, alarmed listening.

"Nothing, my dear. I expect I'm a little nervous. I've been under some strain. Afraid I'm not very good company."

"I don't wonder you're nervous after all you've been through. It's perfectly horrid of those ruffians, but I wouldn't worry about them, dear." She put her arm around him with a quick little affectionate hug. "I won't let them hurt you. I'll make them leave my uncle alone. You see if I don't."

Her promise amused him a little. He smiled. She would be about as efficient in this emergency as a fluffy

little kitten which men instinctively pick up and pet. Yet her sympathy warmed him. And, after all, it was true that most dangers merely threaten and never become acute.

He sat down after supper and tried to read while she busied herself with some fancy work. A Mexican woman had cleared off the table and was doing the dishes.

The book he had picked up was one of Herbert Spencer's. He found it impossible to concentrate. His mind hopped back, whenever he would let it alone, to the immediate problem of his life. How was it possible to cope with such ruffians as these who were his enemies, strong, unscrupulous men striding to their end without jumpy nerves to hamper them? One ought either to get out of their way or knuckle down, unless he were like this Sibley, as game and harsh and forceful as they were. And the odds were that these wolves would drag down and devour Sibley, too, if he stayed in their vicinity, in spite of his scornful confidence and his uncanny skill at self-defence.

Someone hammered on the door of the house. Turley leaped from his chair as though released by a spring. His legs shook as he moved forward.

Eve reached the door first to let in this imperious visitor. Mobeetie Bill turned the key in the lock after he had entered the hall and came into the room. His faded old eyes were shining with excitement.

"They're after you, Turley. Right damn now. Headin' thisaway already. Light out. Pronto."

The heart of the editor died within him. It had come, the hour he had dreaded. "Where shall I go?" he faltered.

"Anywheres but here. Slip out the back way. Circle round an' head for my shack. We'll git you a horse."

"And—Eve?"

"They won't hurt her none. She'll be in my care. Don't worry about her. Move lively."

Turley forgot his resolution not to be driven away. Already he could hear the low, ominous voice of the mob. Anything was better than to stay and face it.

Eve urged him to speed. "Hurry—hurry, dearest," she cried, and clung to the trembling man as she pushed him toward the back door.

They passed through the kitchen. He opened the door. A revolver barked. There was a spatter of 'dobe dirt from the wall three feet from his head. Hurriedly he closed the door and drew back.

His face was ashen. "God!" he murmured.

"Too late," the ex-buffalo hunter said. He bolted the door and blew out the kitchen lamp. "It wasn't aimed to hit you, Turley. Jes' meant as a warnin' to stay here."

"What'll I do?" By sheer will power Turley dragged himself back from panic. "I can't stay here and endanger Eve." There flashed to his mind a picture of the Galeyville battle as he had imagined it, scores of guns pouring lead into a building where one man crouched like a trapped wolf. In such a mêlée his niece might be shot down before the mob dragged him out. He could not risk that. He must give himself up.

"Don't push on yore reins," the old-timer urged. "We'll play for time. Hear what they got to say. Talk 'em out of it if we can."

Mobeetie Bill had no confidence in his own programme. But they were in no position to choose. The cards were stacked and had to be played that way. Strangely enough, his old blood warmed to the danger. It had been years since peril had jumped at him in this stark fashion. He remembered the yell of Morgan's raiders. It was in his throat ready to leap out. Back of that, in his early youth, he had ridden on that disastrous filibustering expedition when gallant Ewan Cameron lost his life. He had seen George Crittenden draw the white bean that meant life and then hand it to a married comrade with the remark that he could afford to take another chance. Brave days those, when life and death hung on the colour of a bean drawn from a box. It thrilled him to renew for an hour the old daily association with danger. Better, far better, than to sit nodding in the sun waiting for his days to draw out.

They could hear outside the tramp of feet, the sound of many voices. Mobeetie Bill blew out the lamp in the sitting room.

"Let 'em guess where we're at," he added.

The mob murmur died down. A heavy voice called:

"Come outa there, Turley. We want to see you."

It was Mobeetie Bill who answered. He stepped to the window, which was open, and looked out into the moonlit street.

"Evenin', Mr. French. Who was it you said you wanted?"

"Tom Turley—an' quick, too."

"What you want with him?"

"None of yore business. Who are you, anyhow? It's Turley we're after."

"Me, why I'm only an old donker, a stove-up pilgrim from Texas. You know Mobeetie Bill, don't you, Curt?"

French moved forward. "Tell Turley if he doesn't come outa there we'll drag him by the neck. No use hidin'. We know he's there."

"Now, looky here, Mr. French," the old-timer protested. "I 'low you don't mean any good to Turley. Let's talk this over, friendly-like. Prob'ly we can fix up a reasonable compromise."

"Don't argue with me, you old fool," French roared. "I'm comin' to drag him out immediate."

Later Eve never could explain the impulse that urged her to swift, rash action. It was very likely a reaction of what she had been thinking of in regard to Tilatha McLennon. Tilatha had known what to do when the life of her lover was in danger. Tilatha had not stood and wrung her hands despairingly. So Eve now stepped out of character and did an amazing thing.

Without a word, she slipped into the hall and unlocked the door. In another moment she had whipped it open, stepped outside, and closed it behind her. She stood, drenched in the moonlight, facing that hungry wild-beast mob.

Once there her spirit fainted. It was appalling to look down on all those harsh faces, unshaven, savage, inflamed by the strange lust of the pack for the kill. They were normal human beings, most of them, moved by

the common emotions of mankind, by tenderness, by generosity, by greed, by sudden unaccountable hates and loves. None of this she saw now. They were not individuals, but the pack. Only one stood out among them. He was bearded, heavy, full-bodied. His eyes were bloodshot, face gross and sullen. He moved slowly toward her, as far as the bottom step.

There he stood staring at this apparition in white, the slim, golden little creature who confronted him and his followers. It could have been no more astonishing if a winged angel from heaven had descended from the sky, so alien was she to the spirit of their purpose. What was she doing here? From where had she come? Some of those present may have heard that a niece of Turley had come to town from the East. If so, they had given the fact no attention. Scores of people poured in daily to share in the sudden prosperity of the camp.

"Who in Mexico are you?" demanded French hoarsely.

She found her voice. "I'm Eve—Eve Turley. You mustn't hurt my uncle. Oh, you mustn't—you mustn't, please."

The words out of her soft throat were like music. Tears welled into the blue eyes. Haloed by the flood of moonlight, her beauty seemed unearthly

CHAPTER XXIV

MOBEETIE BILL DRAWS A BLACK BEAN

THE effect of Eve's sudden appearance, of her broken appeal, was startling. The wild frontier always respected good women. They were as safe as though they were in God's pocket. The worst outlaw, if there was any basis of manhood in him, would go far to aid and succour any of them in need. This girl's youth, her charming helplessness, an air of innocence enhanced by the simple white dress she wore touched by the magic of moonlight, all reached them as though they had been well-calculated stage devices.

Even Curt French was taken aback. He glared sullenly at her, while his slow brain groped with the problem. A bully and ruffian, a killer never deterred by moral distinctions as to fair play, his impulse was to crush her and push on to his purpose. But he knew that would not do. Vaguely he was aware that the men behind him were sentimentalizing the situation. She was not just a fool girl to them; she was for the moment the embodiment of an ideal they had been cherishing in their hearts through the sodden years.

"Now, missie, you-all better run along somewheres. We 'low to have a li'l' talk with yore uncle," he wheedled. "Jes' a li'l talk about business, y'understand."

"No—no!" Her refusal went past him to the men behind. It was as though she knew that she might win them but not their leader. "You won't do him any harm, will you? If you understood—if you knew how good he is——"

"We know he's backin' up this killer Sibley," someone flung back.

"But he just asked you to wait, not to make up your minds too soon. I'm only a girl. I don't know anything about it." Her voice broke in a little wail. "But I know my uncle is good—and—and you mustn't hurt him."

"This yere is a he-man town," another man growled. "We don't aim to let him run it like a kids' school an' then renig when he feels like it."

"Cripes, no!" French flung out an oath. "Nor he can't hide behind a woman's skirt. Outa the way, girl. We won't hurt you none, but we aim to get Turley."

He took two steps forward, then stopped. Someone had come around the corner of the building, vaulted lightly to the porch, and was standing beside Eve.

The killer's jaw dropped. Never in his turbulent life had he met such a surprise as this. The man who had joined the girl was Boone Sibley.

It was a murmur to begin with, the sound that swept the crowd, then, as the name passed from one to another, it became a roar. Before the harsh menace of it Eve shrank back, appalled. But not the Texan. He faced the rising storm of rage silently, eyes undaunted, poised figure motionless. He made no gesture toward a weapon.

The house door opened. Mobeetie Bill came out,

caught Eve by the shoulders, whirled her bodily, and pushed her into the passage. He grinned at Boone.

"Looks like a pleasant time was gonna be had by all," he drawled.

"What you doing here?" demanded Boone.

"Or you, comin' down to cases?" the old man retorted. His faded blue eyes were blazing with excitement.

There was an upheaval in the mob, a shrill outcry, and from it broke two men. They ran past French to the porch.

"Not the right fellow," one screamed, and the other, "We're alibi-in' this bird." They were the two old prospectors, Hassayampa Pete and Toughfoot Bozeman.

French threw a wild shot from the holster—a second —a third. In the moonlight his distorted shadow was like some malignant creature conjured from hell.

Mobeetie Bill tried to steady himself, caught at the wall, began to slide down. With incredible swiftness Boone's Colt was out and booming. He fired twice, then stopped.

French had dropped his sixshooter and was clutching at his elbow, face distorted with pain.

A voice shouted. "Stop shootin'. Listen! Listen to me, you damn fools!" Sheriff Brady pushed through the crowd and raised his hands. "Listen! Listen!"

Hassayampa Pete had snatched up the fallen gun of the killer. Boone dropped the barrel of his revolver toward the floor and stood waiting. French cursed bitterly, savagely.

"Listen, you wooden-heads!" the sheriff ordered, his words carrying to everyone present. "He's not the man that killed Buck—this Sibley here. Not the guy that held up the stage. Him nor Dusty, neither. They were forty miles away at the time—in the desert near Sugarloaf, talkin' to Pete an' Bozeman at their camp when the stage was stopped. Step up, Bozeman. You tell 'em."

Bozeman told them, and after him Hassayampa Pete. Sibley's alibi was established beyond doubt.

"Who did it, then," someone demanded sullenly, "since you know so doggone much, Brady?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow," the sheriff answered. Then, abruptly: "Don't you, Curt! Don't you! I'll sure drap you in yore tracks."

Brady had snatched out his gun and was covering French. The bad man had drawn a long-barrelled .45 from under his shoulder. He had done it with his left hand, awkwardly and slowly, because his right was disabled.

"Take that gun from him, someone," the sheriff ordered. "You, with the brown hat. Take it, can't you? Now bring it here."

"I'll sure fix you for this, Brady," the bad man swore, "if it's the last thing I ever do."

The sheriff did not answer him. He addressed the crowd. "You better drift, boys, don't you reckon? You're doing yoreselves no good here. Turley was right. He told the truth, but you were hell bent on believin' Sibley guilty. So you had to get all het up an' go off

half cocked. I sure hope you-all are proud of yoreselves. Me, I'd say you'd ought to be put to bed an' spanked real thorough."

Someone laughed and broke the tension. From that moment the danger was past. The crowd began to thin away. French went, nursing his elbow and threatening vengeance.

Already Boone was on his knees supporting the old buffalo hunter. "Hit bad, old-timer?" he asked in a low voice.

Mobeetie Bill's cracked laugh answered. "Not bad, Texas man, but good—good an' thorough. I got aplenty."

Boone picked him up, carried him into the house, and followed Eve into her room. Gently he put the old man down on the bed.

"Has someone gone for a doctor?" Turley asked.

"No use," the old fellow answered. "I'm headin' fast for the divide. You stay with me, Texas man. The trail's gettin' steep—an' it's dark. I got to find the way home."

Already his mind was beginning to wander.

"I'll go get Doc," the sheriff said.

"My bronc musta piled me," the wounded man murmured, his hand against his side. "I'm right bad hurt, seems like—all stove up inside. . . . The greasers are crowdin' us, boys. Look out."

Vaguely his mind was in the past. "Dark to-night, sure enough . . . but . . . right clost . . . to home." His feeble voice rang firmer. "I drew a black bean, boys. Suits me fine. So long. Well, I'm ready, you damned greasers."

Presently he tried to raise himself without success. He waved a weak arm. The old rebel yell quavered in his throat.

Ten minutes later he passed away.

Eve looked up at Boone, frightened. She had never before been so close to death. "Has he—gone?"

The Texan looked at her and nodded. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Don't you feel bad," he said in a murmur. "He wouldn't 'a' had it different, not if he could have chosen for himself."

Turley looked at the old wrinkled face lying on the pillow, and he was greatly moved. "He died on my account—came to warn me what they were going to do."

The Texan smoothed back gently the scant gray hair. "He'd say it was all right, if he was alive to tell you. No kick comin' from him. He took his fighting chance, like any man has got to do. Maybe he knows how we feel."

"It's terrible," the girl sobbed. "They killed the poor old man, and he wouldn't have harmed anyone."

The young man differed. "No, it's not terrible. He had to die soon, an' this was the way it was comin' to him—the one way he would have wanted it to be. He wouldn't have asked a better break. You see, miss, he was one of the old Lone Star State fightin' crowd, an' you can't say better than that of anyone. You tell 'em in yore paper to-morrow, Mr. Turley, that he knew Travis an' Bowie an' Crockett an' fought with 'em. Tell 'em the story of the black bean."

The Adam's apple in Turley's throat shot up and down spasmodically. "I'll do just that," he promised.

They moved toward the other room, the lamp in the editor's hand. The Mexican woman drew Turley to one side to discuss arrangements with him. The two went into the kitchen, leaving Boone and Eve together in the moonlit bedroom.

The girl looked up at the young Texan, gifts of admiration and gratitude in her eyes. "You saved my uncle's life," she cried.

"Sho! I didn't do any such a thing," he protested.

She was tremendously keyed up, lifted into an hysterical exaltation from terror and despair. Always dependent, always a creature of her emotions, she yielded now to natural impulse. Her slight body swayed forward. Her arms slipped around his neck. She clung to him, trembling like an aspen in the wind.

The door of the room opened. Dr. Peters walked in, followed by Tilatha McLennon and her brother.

Eve's arms relaxed and fell. She looked at Tilatha, defensively, as though she had been accused.

"Mr. Sibley saved us," she said slowly. "He—saved us from that awful mob." She broke down and began to sob.

"He's the greatest rescuer in the business," Tilatha answered, her voice hard and dry. "As a saver of ladies in distress he has no match. Isn't that true, Mr. Sibley?"

Boone had rehearsed several times what he would say to this girl when they met, how he would put into a dozen words his gratitude for what she had done for him. But her irony stung. It struck dead the friendliness in

him. The last thing he wanted was to be a knight errant, a woman's man. His cold eyes met the hard glitter in hers.

"You do a little in the rescue line yore own self, don't you, Miss McLennon?" he drawled.

She flushed angrily. "I'm only an amateur beside you. Believe me, I'm quite through now I've squared accounts—if I have."

"Oh, with interest, Miss McLennon. I'm sure a heap obliged——"

She brushed his words aside almost insultingly. "Sheriff Brady came for the doctor. Perhaps it's more important for him to attend his patient than to listen to us make speeches."

Peters had moved to the bed the instant he came into the room. Now he spoke, very quietly: "My patient is past needing me, Miss McLennon."

Tilatha turned to him with a startled exclamation. The flare of fierce challenge died out of her eyes.

CHAPTER XXV

BOONE GETS A JOB

ALIVE, Mobeetie Bill had been of no importance in the community, nothing but a garrulous old-timer who filled a chair on the sidewalk in front of the Dallas House and told cheerful reminiscences of the good old days. He had been a bull whacker and a mule skinner, a buffalo hunter and a soldier. His life had been an adventurous one, but the younger generation often was in too much of a hurry to listen to his comments on the passing show as illustrated by experience.

Dead, he had been for a day the most important figure in Tough Nut. The circumstances of his going might not have occasioned much discussion if Turley had not dramatized the event in the *Gold Pocket.*

Old Bill would have been much embarrassed if he could have read what was there said about him. He would have called it "guff." It would have seemed to him like boasting, even though another man had written the account.

There was a sketchy story of his life, pieced together from information dropped by him at various times. This followed the lead covering his death. On the editorial page was a black-bordered box inclosing a tribute to him headed "Mobeetie Bill Draws A Black Bean."

The editorial ran:

We called him Mobeetie Bill because he came to us from the Panhandle. He was a Texan and proud of it. We never knew him by his real name William Blake until after his death. Nor did we know that in the days when Travis and Bowie and Crockett fought for the freedom of the Lone Star State they hailed him comrade. He lived an adventurous life, and as he lived he died. So he would have had it. Pioneer, soldier, buffalo hunter, freighter, he played always a man's part.

Nearly fifty years ago William Blake rode with Ewan Cameron when his expedition crossed the border in pursuit of marauding thieves. The story of that unfortunate raid, filled with high lights of tragedy and heroism, deserves to rank in some ways with that of the Alamo. The invaders were captured and ordered flung into dungeons with the lowest criminals. They overcame their armed guard and escaped to the mountains. Some few reached the border, but most of them were recaptured after desperate resistance.

General Santa Ana, in reprisal, ordered the Texans decimated. Their individual fate was determined by lottery. Each man drew a bean from a sack. If the bean was white, he lived; if it was black, he died.

The story is that the Texans went to that fatal lottery as though it had been a game. They jested as they drew the beans that meant life or death. One of them, George Bibb Crittenden, later a Confederate general in our Civil War, gave the white bean he had drawn to a comrade who had wife and children, with the remark that since he was unmarried he could afford to take another chance. William Blake was fortunate enough to get one of the white beans that meant life. Years later he was freed from a Mexican dungeon.

The last words of Mobeetie Bill were that he had drawn a black bean. He smiled when he said it. Never a man passed into the unknown with soul less troubled. God rest our gallant old friend. He died to help a girl and an unarmed man.

Tough Nut read the story and the editorial, and the effect was immediate. Drunkards wept maudlin tears over their rum. Miners agreed that he sure was a good old donker and it was a damned shame. Women grew

sentimental and busied themselves about the funeral. Citizens affirmed, not too loudly, that something ought to be done about the killing.

Almost everybody in town, with the exception of Curt French, attended the funeral. The Quinns, their cousin Elder, Bob Hardy, and Brad Prouty were there in a body. In an attempt to stem the tide of public opinion, Whip had announced that he would pay all expenses of the interment. This gesture cost him nothing, since Sibley, Peters, and Turley, all present as pallbearers, had already settled with the undertaker.

Whatever the intentions of the Quinns might have been as to Sibley, these had temporarily to be postponed. It would not do just now to precipitate trouble. The town was in no mood to permit it.

"Right soon folks will be over this sentimental jag," Whip told his brother and French. "Then we'll talk turkey to this pilgrim."

"An' what if he talks turkey to us first?" Curt wanted to know from the bed on which he lay. "They say Brady has done made him a deputy. What in Mexico does that mean if not trouble?"

Whip looked down at him blackly. "There wouldn't have been any trouble if you an' Sing hadn't robbed the stage, or if you hadn't got drunk an' killed Buck. Or even then, if you hadn't bought that fool pendant for Faro Kate with the greenbacks. An' if that ain't enough, you've got to get drunk again an' bump off old Mobeetie Bill instead of Sibley. By God, Curt, you sure wear yore welcome out amongst yore friends."

"Don't pull yore picket pin, Whip, an' go to snortin',"

answered French, scowling sulkily. "I had bad luck. I ain't denyin' it, am I?"

"You made yore own bad luck, an' ours, too. Now we've got to back yore fool plays an' bluff our way through. This last week you've done nothing but get us in bad. Right now we're mighty unpopular, an' you especial. It's got to stop, Curt, unless you want to go it alone without us."

"Was it me fixed up to tar an' feather Turley an' run him outa town?"

"No, but it was you got drunk an' killed old Bill," Whip answered curtly.

"I noticed none of you Quinns was on the job that night," French jeered. "Not a one of you."

"You needn't have been, either. I told you to stay out of it an' let the crowd do the work for us, but, no! you were hell bent on being in it. Consequence was, you kill Mobeetie Bill, an' Sibley shows you up like a busted flush."

"Me! Me! Shows me up?" roared the bully. "Goddlemighty, Whip, you cain't talk thataway to me."

Quinn's bleak eyes met the furious ones of the wounded man. "What you mean I can't, Curt? I'm tellin' you what this whole town is sayin'. Make yore choice, an' make it quick. Do like I tell you from right damn now, or play a lone hand."

"Me afraid of that pilgrim, by——"

"I didn't say that. I said that so far he'd taken every trick—an' he has. It'll be yore turn later—maybe. Question is, are you quittin' all this foolishness, or ain't you?"

"I'll sure make that bird climb a tree when my arm gets right," French bragged. "If anyone thinks different——"

"Not the point right now, Curt. Answer my question. Are you gonna let me play the hand from now on? If you trail with our outfit you've got to take orders."

"Take orders! Where do you get that talk from, Whip? I never have took orders. I never will. Far as this stage hold-up goes, Sing is in deep as I am. Don't you forget that for a minute, Whip. If they hang it on me, they're gonna hang it on him, too. You can bet yore boots on that."

Whip looked at him with a steady, unfathomable gaze. Something about it made the wounded man uncomfortable. Yet all Quinn said was, in a quiet low voice, "Suits me if it does you, Curt."

"Course, I don't aim to make any trouble," French added by way of concession. "But if you try to make me the goat, I'll squeal sure."

"I see you don't," Quinn returned quietly.

The other man, meeting those cold black eyes, felt a chill run down his spine. He did not know that he had just condemned himself to death.

What French had said was true. After the funeral the sheriff had offered Boone a position as deputy, and the Texan had accepted it.

"I'm gonna call for a showdown," Brady said. "We'll arrest Curt for killin' old Bill, then we'll spring it that he shot Buck Galway, too. I want a deputy back of me who'll stay put."

"Have you figured how you're gonna arrest him with-

out the Quinns takin' a hand?" Boone asked. "Don't forget their cousin Sing was in it. I'll say for the Quinns they back their friends."

"My notion is to drive up to the Widow Slater's, where he's got a room, right after supper time. You'll stay outside with the buckboard an' I'll bring Mr. Curt out. Then we'll take a back street to the jail. It'll be kinda dark, anyhow."

"We may have to hogtie him if he's obstinate."

"That'll be up to him. If he acts up, he'll get what any other bummer would. I'm through kow-towin' to him an' his friends," the sheriff said.

It was growing dark when two men in a buckboard left the Buffalo Corral, drove up Howard Street, turned to the left at Piñon, and drew up in front of the Widow Slater's house. The taller one of the two waited outside, while the shorter one went into the front yard and knocked on the front door.

Mrs. Slater opened to the knock.

"Good-evenin', ma'am," the visitor said. "I'm Sheriff Brady. Like to talk to Curt. No, you needn't tell him I'm here. I'll jest drap in on him. This room? Much obliged, ma'am."

French was playing, awkwardly and slowly, a one-handed game of solitaire, using the bed quilt for a table. He looked up when the sheriff entered. His jaw dropped. He cursed as his left hand dived under the pillow.

The sheriff had him covered. "Empty, Curt, empty. Bring yore hand out empty. I don't want to plug you. . . . That's the idee."

"Whajawant?" the bad man growled, in one word.

"You, Curt. I'm arrestin' you for killin' old Bill."

"Had his gun out, hadn't he?"

"Not so I could notice it—till after you began to shoot."

"Well, he had—him an' that Sibley, too."

"You'll get a chance to tell the judge that, Curt. Lucky you're dressed. We got a rig out front for you."

"I'm not gonna stand for that, Brady. You cain't get biggity with me. I've killed guys for less."

"That's why I'm arrestin' you. No use bellyachin', Curt. You're going with me."

French hesitated, then admitted defeat in a fury of anger. "Onct I get out, Brady, I'll kill you on sight."

"You're not out yet. You're just going in. Here's yore hat."

Sullenly the killer moved to the door, passed into the other room, and out of the house. He drew back when he caught sight of the driver on the buckboard.

"So you're in this," he snarled. "It's a frame-up to gun me whilst you've got the dead wood on me."

"Get in that buckboard an' don't be a fool, Curt," the sheriff ordered. "You'll get a fair run for yore money an' that's a lot more than you'd give either one of us."

By back streets Boone drove the buckboard to the jail. Once French shouted to a man he knew, "Tell Whip Quinn this —— —— sheriff slipped up whilst I was sleepin' an' is takin' me to jail."

Brady took his prisoner upstairs and locked him in a cell. All the time the vitriolic tongue of the bad man flung blistering epithets at him. The officer paid not the

least attention. Presently he rejoined Sibley downstairs in the office.

"I reckon now we can begin to look for trouble," he said to his new deputy.

"Trouble on our trail, sure enough. Question is, what kind? I don't hardly think the Quinns are ripe for shootin' yet, not in public, anyhow. Whip's too smart for that. He knows the town wouldn't like it, an' he's not ready to ride roughshod over public opinion. Not for a while, anyhow."

"My notion, too, but you never can tell. It'll be some kind of law move first, don't you reckon? Bly eats outa the Quinns' hands. He's the J.P."

"Maybeso."

"Onless Russ or Sing hear we've arrested Curt before Whip does. They're liable to come a-shootin', either one or both."

Within the hour Whip Quinn and Bob Hardy, accompanied by Bly and Dugan of the express company, were in the office of the sheriff.

"What's this grand-stand play, Brady?" demanded Whip harshly. "You know you can't make it stick."

The officer ignored the curtness of Quinn's voice and manner. "I'm sheriff, Whip. The boys elected me to enforce the law. I aim to do it. So I had to arrest Curt for killin' Mobeetie Bill. That's reasonable, ain't it?"

"Did you have to sneak up on him when he was alone an' asleep? Why not arrest him open an' aboveboard, if it was a straight game?"

"I arrested him open enough, an' he wasn't asleep, either."

For the first time since he had come into the room Whip let his black eyes rest on Boone. "If you didn't aim this at us, Brady, whyfor did you get this Texas warrior to help you?"

"I know a good man when I see him, Whip."

"You know a man who is our enemy, an' you pick him for yore deputy—a man accused of murder an' robbery. What am I to think of that?" Beneath the heavy black brows Whip's dark sunken eyes blazed. The fingers of his left hand nursed the imperial below the tight thin lips. "You've always been against us, Brady. You're showin' yore hand now because you think we're in a jam."

"Nothin' to that, Whip," the sheriff denied. "Live an' let live. That's my motto. As to what you say about Sibley, he's been cleared of the stage hold-up. If he's yore enemy, I don't know it. I made him my deputy because he'll do to take along, if you want to know."

"Cleared by a coupla old desert rats you could buy for a pint of redeye," Whip flung back bitterly. "We've not come to the end of that road yet. What's yore play, Brady? Why are you standin' in with this Texas killer? That's the question folks are askin'."

Brady had been brought up on the fighting frontier. He was a quiet man, one who preferred always to sidestep trouble when he could. But he was no coward. Now anger burned in his face.

"They're askin' another question, Whip," he retorted hardily. "They're askin' where Curt French got the ten marked twenty-dollar bills that fellow Lacy lost when the stage was robbed?"

Whip glared at him. For a moment an explosion seemed imminent. Then Dugan cut in suavely:

"One moment, gentlemen. Do you claim, Sheriff, that Curt French was one of the stage hold-ups?"

"I claim the evidence points to him."

Dugan had no more to say. He looked at Bob Hardy, a triumphant little smile twitching at his lips.

Hardy was a smaller man than the Quinns. He had come from a city of the Middle West, and he lacked the brawn and sinew that an outdoor life had given his friends. But his skim-milk shallow eyes were cold and hard. Now he stepped forward and took the stage.

"I want Curt, Sheriff, for robbing the United States mail. This is a Federal case, and it takes precedence of any claim you may have on him."

Brady stared at the deputy marshal, taken aback by the audacity of the demand. Yet he was not sure that he could deny the legality of Hardy's position. As a representative of the United States government he had a right to take French in charge, very likely had a prior right to his own. He played for time.

"Kinda sudden this, Bob. But look at it thisaway. Murder is a more serious offence than robbin' the mails. Couldn't that come first?" His perplexed doubt was offered to the company at large, but his eyes turned to Sibley to learn what he thought of it.

"Looks so to me, but I'm no lawyer," Boone answered.

"Fellow, you're not in this," the marshal said to Sibley insolently. "Brady, use your head. The government has a murder charge, too. This hold-up killed

Buck Galway, didn't he? An' Buck was guarding the mails."

"Do you claim you're arrestin' French for that?" the sheriff asked sceptically.

"I'm arresting him because you say you've got evidence against him. Have you? Or are you four-flushing?"

"I have. Consid'rable of it."

"Then that's enough. I want my prisoner."

The sheriff looked down at the table as though he could gather wisdom from it. Doggedly he said: "I got to have some kind of legal paper, even if you're right."

Hardy handed to Brady a document demanding the body of French.

The county officer read it, still uncertain whether it was effective in law.

He grinned a little, to palliate the effect of his words. "Course, you may be runnin' a shananigan on me, Whip. Looks like you got the dead wood on me right now, if you got a right to serve this paper on me."

"Ask Bly," Whip said scornfully. "He drew it up, an' it's gonna stick."

"It'll stick if I'm convinced it's okay," Brady said stoutly.

"Then I'd advise you to be convinced," Quinn flung back.

"Don't get on the prod, boys," the justice of the peace advised. "It's a perfectly good order of the court, Brady. You got no option but to honour it."

Again the sheriff looked toward his deputy, found no suggestion in Sibley's wooden countenance, and decided to give way.

"All right, Bob. You can have him. Want to keep him in the jail here?"

"No, sir."

Brady looked at Boone. "Bring him down, Sibley."

Five minutes later the small group of Quinn adherents went away jubilantly, French in their midst. The prisoner left some threats for the sheriff and his deputy to ponder over. He swore either to run them out of town or see them planted in Boot Hill.

Boone observed that Whip Quinn did not echo any of his henchman's wild talk. In fact, he made one sharp criticism. "That's plumb foolish talk, Curt. You're shootin' off yore mouth heap much when it's not necessary."

Later Boone wondered why Whip had declared himself thus publicly. Was he getting ready an alibi against the day when he might need one?

CHAPTER XXVI

TILATHA BLOWS HOT AND COLD

WITH a caution not in the least obvious, Boone walked the streets of Tough Nut. His bearing, his strong stride, held the easy confidence of one at peace with the world. Yet he knew that at any moment a bullet might come whistling from door or window at him. French had been released on bond given by Whip Quinn and his man Bly, and he was breathing vengeance threats at every gambling house. Probably he would wait until his shooting arm was healed, but his impatience might outweigh his discretion. The man's vanity had been affronted. The Texan guessed that he would be simmering with rage until he had wiped the slate clean.

The Quinns and their other adherents, too, had to be reckoned with as enemies, though Boone did not expect any of them to pot him from ambush. They were too arrogant and self-confident for that. They would set the scene for a battle, take whatever odds they could, but they would fight in the open.

In front of Jefford's, Boone met the two old prospectors who had come to town to testify in his behalf. He stopped and shook hands.

"I haven't told you-all yet how much obliged I am

for yore good word the other night in front of Turley's place," he said.

"Hmp! Nothin' to that, fellow," snorted Hassayampa Pete. "You hadn't paid us yet for our time an' expense stickin' around town. If you'd got shot up we'd been out what all is comin' to us."

"Y'betcha!" agreed his partner. "An' what I can hear you ain't any too damn good a risk now. Don't you reckon you better settle with us immediate before anything happens?"

Boone smiled. These gnarled old desert rats would hate to admit they had helped him out of friendliness. "Suits me. What's the damage?"

"Oh, well, we don't aim to break you," Pete said, and named a sum astonishingly low.

Boone paid it, thanked them, and went on his way. They were good old scouts even though they harshly denied it.

At the post office Boone saw Tilatha McLennon. An underlying glow of carmine streamed into her cheeks. She knew this, and it annoyed her. In answer to his greeting she bowed stiffly.

Boone got his mail and returned to the doorway. He ripped open a letter from his mother, but his eyes followed the figure that moved down the street with such light grace and supple movement. She walked as though she loved the air and the sunshine, as though she were kin to all wild free things.

He put the letter back in his pocket, stepped out, and presently was beside her. She turned, a hard, lively light in the eyes beneath the finely arched brows.

"Like to say a few words to you, Miss McLennon," he said, lifting his wide hat.

"There's nothing preventing you, is there?"

Unfortunately, he smiled. She was so uncompromisingly hostile. At once he knew that smile had been a mistake. The stab of her eyes, which had in them little tawny flecks matching the hair of lustrous copper, dared him to be amused at her. He did not say at once what he had come to say. Instead he asked her a question.

"Why do you hate me so?"

"Hate you? I don't hate you. But it's just like you to flatter yourself that I do. You're so—so important, aren't you?" She flung it at him insultingly, with a flare of feminine ferocity.

Her manner puzzled him. He did not see any justification for it. Why did she always clash with him whenever they came together?

"Am I?" He smiled again. For the life of him he couldn't help it. She was so direct and uncompromising.

"I suppose you think—because people talk about you—that you're a great man an' can strut around——"

"So I strut, too, do I?" He strangled a desire to shout with laughter.

She understood his reaction, and it irritated her the more, drove her on to a further exhibition of temper that later she would lash herself for. "You're hateful," she told him.

"I see. I'm hateful, but you don't hate me," he drawled.

Two defiant stars flashed at him. "I never knew a man so—so——"

She stopped, for sheer inadequacy of expression.

"All right, Miss McLennon, I'm conceited an' I strut an' I'm hateful. We'll let it go at that, unless you'd like to free yore mind real thorough. But I'm not ungrateful. I haven't had a chance yet to thank you for what you did for me at Galeyville. I'm thankin' you now. Hadn't been for you I'd never have reached the roof in time, an' if I had I'd never have made a getaway without yore pony."

Under the direct look of his steady gray eyes she felt her blood flutter. Somehow he had disarmed her anger at once.

"Billy got back," she said irrelevantly, not knowing what else to say.

"I never saw the like of it—you comin' across the roofs to pull me outa the tightest hole I was ever in. Twice I'd told you I didn't want yore help. But I took it, an' mighty glad to get it. So no matter how hateful I am, you'll know that once I wasn't struttin'."

This time she did not mind his smile. She liked it. There was something warm and winning in it that went straight to her hammering heart. This cold, hard man had never offered her friendship before, if he was really offering that now.

Her eyes fell. "I don't think you're hateful always," she said.

"That's something," he laughed. "Anyhow, I got it said, what I been wantin' to tell you."

"There's something I wanted to tell you, that first night we met, but I didn't say it. You wouldn't let me—at least, I thought you wouldn't. It hurt my feelings

because you acted as though it didn't much matter whether you had rescued me or not. An' first thing I knew I was mad at you."

"There seems most always to be a breeze when you an' I are in the same neighbourhood," he commented.

"I don't know how to say 'Thank you' nice, the way some girls do. I'm too independent, maybe."

"You're criticizin' Miss McLennon; I'm not."

"An' I fly off the handle so. I've always had my own way too much, I reckon."

He had nothing to say about that. Tilatha took his silence as condemnation.

"If I were like Eve Turley, so sweet an' pretty an' gentle——"

"Why, then you wouldn't be Tilatha McLennon," he finished for her.

Again she felt that he was judging her. She thought of Eve, inheritor of all the graces that make women dear to men. Before her flashed a picture of her in Boone Sibley's arms. Of course he would love a girl like that. How could he help it, or any man on whom she turned those soft appealing eyes? Jealousy flamed up in her like lighted tow.

"Anyhow, you wouldn't want me to be grateful her way," she said, and could have bitten her tongue out a moment later.

"No, I wouldn't," he said promptly. His thought was, neither she nor Eve nor any other woman.

Naturally she misunderstood. "Don't worry. I'll not trespass on her privileges. Am I to congratulate you yet?"

He looked at her. "You sure take the cake, Miss McLennon."

"For bad temper, I suppose you mean."

"Take it any way you like it," he replied coldly.

They had walked to the end of a side street that looked down into the valley and across to the mountains beyond. He lifted his hat and turned to go.

Out of the last house on the street came Russ Quinn. He stopped in his stride to stare at them, in the middle of the road, directly in the path of Boone. There was in his attitude the menace of a hesitation that might in an instant leap to action.

Boone moved forward evenly, eyes fixed on the face of his foe.

"Russ," the girl cried in warning.

Already Quinn had read the meaning of the girl's stormy face. They had been quarrelling, these two. He moved aside and swept his hat off in a bow to the Texan.

"Not yet, Mr. Sibley," he jeered. "It'll be some other day for you an' me."

"You'll find me waitin' at the gate, sir," Boone said quietly.

"Any time, any place, Texas warrior."

Boone did not look back, but he knew Russ Quinn had joined Tilatha.

CHAPTER XXVII

EXIT A BAD CITIZEN

SHERIFF BRADY took the stage and train to Tucson. Casually he mentioned at the Last Chance that he was going to run down a tip he had been given as to the whereabouts of a horse thief wanted in Cochise. His real purpose was to consult a lawyer in whom he had confidence as to his status in the Curt French case. It would be strange, he thought, if the law was so written that a man could walk the streets undisturbed with two separate murder charges hanging over his head.

The sheriff was back in Tough Nut next day, his mind made up as to what he could and could not do.

"Matlock says if Curt is free we can arrest him," Brady told Boone. "If the government wants to sit in, it will have to bring charges against him in the proper legal way. Bob Hardy hasn't done that. He don't aim to put any charges on record at all. Well, we'll arrest Curt again an' make the Quinns show their hand. They'll have to put chips in the pot if they want to draw cards."

"Sounds reasonable."

"Anything happen while I was away?"

"Not much. Quiet all along the Potomac. Oh, one little thing, which may or may not be important. Sing

Elder had words with Curt French at the Occidental. Don't know what the row was about."

"You can guess, can't you?"

"If I was guessin', I'd say Sing was some sore at Curt for ballin' up that little business they were on the other day. I'll lay a two-bit bet with you, Sheriff, Curt ain't going to lie down in brotherly love with the Quinns much longer."

"No takers present. Now, about this arrest. The sooner the quicker. Why not now?"

"You're boss of this round-up, Sheriff. Now it is."

They made what preparations were necessary and started on their way.

"He'd ought to be gettin' around to the gambling houses about this time of night," Brady said.

They did not find him at Dolan's Palace, but Boone saw there a man he had met in the hills, Tom Tracy. His arm was in a sling from the wound he had received during the attack on the Mexicans.

"How's Dusty Rhodes gettin' along?" the Texan asked him.

"I'm not keepin' cases on Dusty," the man answered sourly. "Ask Til McLennon, if you're anxious to know. I hear she nursed him real tender."

"Better look cheerful when you talk about Miss McLennon," Boone advised him coldly. "Some of her friends might misunderstand yore manner."

"Do you claim to be one of them?" Tracy asked insolently. "She has some right ornery ones."

"We'll not discuss Miss McLennon here, Tracy."

The cowboy looked at him and started to say some-

thing, then changed his mind. He wanted to be ugly, but the steely eyes daunted him. This Sibley was no kind of pilgrim to work off his temper on. Moreover, at that precise moment he heard the sheriff put a question to the bartender. Brady wanted to know, in a low voice, if Curt French had been around that evening.

Tracy glanced at the sheriff and back at the deputy, murmured an indistinct defiance, and withdrew from talk. A moment later he departed by the back door.

"That fellow Tracy has gone to warn French we're out after him, looks to me," Boone said to his chief, as the cowboy slipped out. "We better get right busy."

They tried Jefford's and the Last Chance. French had not been in either place. "Liable to be at home yet," one faro dealer said to Boone, a gleam of malice in his eye. "He don't get around so much since—since his accident."

The officers walked to the house where French roomed.

"Better wait here an' get him as he comes out," the sheriff decided. "He won't be surprised in his room a second time."

Boone did not answer. He was listening. Voices from within the house came to them, harsh, menacing voices. A shot rang out, two more almost together, then a fourth. There came the sound of running feet—and silence. For a moment they could see shadowy figures vanishing into the darkness.

"Went out the back door, whoever they were," the sheriff said.

"In a sure enough hurry, too. Not waitin' for the neighbours to gather."

Brady drew his Colt's .45 and trod softly toward the house.

"Won't need that, I reckon," Boone said in his ear. "Still, might as well play it safe."

"You figure he's gone," the sheriff whispered.

The Texan looked at him queerly. "Yes, gone."

"If Tracy was here to warn him, what was the shootin' about?"

"Tracy wasn't here."

Boone tried the front door, turned the knob gently, and tiptoed in. From under the door of the bad man's bedroom came a gleam of lamplight. The officers moved gingerly across the floor. One of the boards squeaked. Brady motioned to his deputy to give him right of way. The sheriff felt for the latch, raised it slowly, and flung the door open.

He stood in the doorway, crouched, wary, revolver in hand. "We've got you, French. Don't——"

The words died in his mouth.

Boone looked over his shoulder. A man lay face down, half on the bed and half on the floor. The fingers of the left hand still clutched a sixshooter. His legs were sprawled out awkwardly. The bandaged right arm hung lax. In the supine body was no sign of life.

Neither of the officers needed to turn over the bearded face to know that this was Curt French.

"They got him right," Brady said.

Boone examined the weapon. "He fired once. A bullet struck the floor over there, probably his, after he was hit, likely. . . . See, they hit him three times—here an' here an' once in the throat."

The sheriff agreed. "The last shot after he was down. They intended to make sure."

"They were thorough—figured that a dead man couldn't do 'em any more harm an' that a live one might upset their apple cart."

"The Quinns did it, you think?"

"Heard from Tracy we were gonna arrest French an' beat us to it. Maybe they didn't intend to kill him, only to make sure he'd keep still, but when he acted ugly they let him have it. You can't tell. Might have been that way."

"Which of the Quinns?"

"When we find out which ones Tracy met when he reached the Occidental——"

"How do you know he went to the Occidental?"

"He'd head straight for there, wouldn't he? Since he scouted up the alley he wouldn't meet any of 'em before he reached there, chances are."

"It had got to where the Quinns had to kill him, you figure."

"Don't it look thataway? Maybe not the Quinns, but some of their friends. He got 'em into this jam—first by gettin' drunk an' killin' Buck Galway, next by buying the jewellery with the marked bills, then by shootin' Mobeetie Bill. He'd gone wild. They couldn't control him any longer, an' they didn't know what he would do or say. They had to get rid of him or light out themselves. Naturally, they bumped him off."

"Well, he was a bad citizen. He was after yore scalp an' mine. I won't mourn him any."

"Nor I. He was a killer of the worst kind—irresponsible. He killed when there wasn't any need of it. You could never tell when he would break loose. I expect he would have got me if the Quinns hadn't held him back."

"He died with a gun in his hand. We can't prove he didn't fire the first shot."

"No, I don't reckon he did, but we can't prove it."

For some moments they had heard voices outside. Now someone called to them, asking what the trouble was.

The sheriff went to the door. "You can come in, boys, far as the inner room. Curt French has been killed by parties unknown. Don't come any closer. I want the coroner to look things over first."

The men in the doorway stared at the figure lying on the edge of the bed.

"Who killed him?" someone asked presently.

"Yore guess is as good as ours, Hartley," the sheriff answered. "We found him dead when we got here. We had come to arrest him."

"Mrs. Slater had gone to prayer meetin'. She always does Wednesday evenings," a neighbour contributed.

"Too bad she wasn't here. She would have known who was with Curt," Brady said.

One man rubbed his chin and sidled a look at him, another at Boone. There was suspicion in those furtive glances.

"Doncha reckon they chose a time when they knew she'd be out?" he asked.

"Don't know a thing about that, Hartley. Would you mind bringin' Meade up?" Meade was coroner and undertaker. "Now I'll have to ask you boys to get out for a while."

"Just a moment, Hartley," demurred Boone in his low even voice. "Might as well take a look at our guns before you go, the sheriff's an' mine."

Brady looked at him, surprised. He had not caught, as the Texan had, those looks of veiled suspicion. "What for?" he asked bluntly.

"Some folks might claim we did it, Sheriff, as the easiest way to get rid of him. Better set all minds at rest about that right now."

Boone handed his revolver to Hartley. The man examined it. The hammer rested on an unloaded chamber. The other five held cartridges.

"Not been fired recently," Hartley reported, showing the sixshooter to the others present.

The weapon of the sheriff was passed from one to another.

"Now make sure we're not carryin' any other concealed guns," Boone said.

Hartley patted the bodies of both the sheriff and the deputy.

"Curt had been makin' his threats everywhere what all he was aimin' to do to both of you," someone said. "If you'd killed him, any jury would have said self-defence, an' there wouldn't have been any complaints from decent citizens."

"Only we didn't kill him," Boone replied. "That's the point we're makin' clear."

"Who did, d'you reckon?" blurted out a little fat man, one whose curiosity and instinct for gossip outran discretion.

The sheriff, face immobile, eyes cold and blank, looked at him. "You tell us, Simmons," he suggested.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TOM TRACY WALKS AND TALKS

TOM TRACY stepped out from the Bohemian Theatre and turned his steps down Apache Street. It was nothing to him that the sky was full of stars and that a lovers' moon rode the heavens, that a faint breath of wind carried with it the low murmur of pines. What he wanted to hear was the rattle of poker chips, what he wanted to see was an ace full pinched closely in his hands.

Light swift footsteps sounded behind him. A voice drawled in his ear.

"Evenin', Mr. Tracy. Walk with you, if you don't mind."

Tracy's hangdog look took in Boone Sibley. "I'm particular who I walk with," he blustered.

The Texan laughed. "So am I—sometimes, an' since we're both——"

"I'm not lookin' for yore company, sir."

"Well, I'm lookin' for yores," Boone told him.

The cowboy stopped. "Meanin' what?"

"Like to have a few moments' conversation with you at the sheriff's office."

"You arrestin' me? What for?"

"I didn't say so. Want to ask some questions."

"Ask 'em here," Tracy said belligerently.

"I mentioned the sheriff's office."

"You got another mention comin', fellow. I ain't going there. You got no right to take me."

"I reckon I have. Anyhow, that's the way it'll be."

Stormily Tracy glared at him. Surges of rage swept him but did not reach the point of explosion. There was something about this long Texan that daunted him. He dared not call for a showdown.

"You can't take me without a warrant," he protested.

"Turn to the left here," Boone said in an even, matter-of-fact voice that had compulsion back of it.

Tracy hesitated, then with an oath did as directed.

The sheriff was reading the evening paper in his office. He took his feet down from the desk and nodded amiably at Tracy.

"'Lo, Tom. How's yore arm comin'?"

"Bring me here to ask me that?" growled the cowboy.

"Other things, too." The sheriff put his arms on the desk, leaned forward, and looked hard at the cowboy. "After you left Dolan's awhile ago an' went to the Occidental, you met Sing Elder an' Brad Prouty. The three of you went outside together. Where did you go?"

"Say, what's it to you, Brady?" bristled the hill man. "Do we have to ask you where all we can go?"

"We know what you told 'em. That's not important. Point is, where did you leave 'em an' when?"

"I ain't said I was with 'em a-tall. None of yore business whether I was or wasn't. I choose my own friends, Mr. Sheriff."

Brady nodded, to himself apparently, as though this

confirmed something he had in mind. "We'll lock this fellow up in a cell, Sibley."

"What for?" demanded the cowboy.

"For the murder of Curt French."

Tracy's jaw dropped. He stared at Brady, eyes wide with astonishment. "Curt French—dead?" he got out incredulously.

"Where have you been the last hour an' a half, Tom?" the sheriff asked.

"Why, I been in a box at the Bohemian, drinkin' beer with one of the house girls."

Boone said, "All O.K. I've checked up on that."

"When did you get to the Bohemian?" the sheriff asked Tracy.

"I dunno exactly. Right after I left Sing an' Brad."

"An' where was that?"

The cowboy grew cautious. He had not meant to make that admission, though he did not know what the sheriff was after. It has been surprised out of him by the impact on his mind of stunning news, that French had been killed and he was charged with the crime.

"What you drivin' at, Brady? Do you claim I killed Curt French—if he's dead?"

"The story has been on the streets an hour, Tom. It certainly reached the Bohemian. Funny you hadn't heard it."

"Tell you I was alone in a box with a girl watchin' the show. How would I hear it?"

"You didn't help kill him, then? Didn't know he was gonna be killed?"

"No, sir," Tracy protested, little beads of sweat on his forehead.

"If that's so, all you can get is a penitentiary sentence for concealin' facts and helpin' the murderers escape."

"Me? Why, I got no notion who they are. Didn't know Curt was dead till you told me two minutes ago. I ain't gonna be drug into this, Sheriff."

"Come clean, Tracy," urged Boone. "When did you leave Sing Elder an' Brad Prouty?"

The cowboy gulped. He would have liked to talk with his friends before he did any explaining. As it stood now, he was quite in the dark. One thing he knew: he had no intention of being dragged into this killing when he had had nothing to do with it.

"What's the idea, Brady? Are you claimin' Sing an' Brad did this? That's a fool notion. Ain't they all good friends? Don't they all run together?"

"We're askin' the questions, Tom. You don't have to answer them if you don't like. You can stand yore fightin' chance of acquittal at the trial."

"Trial!" the cowboy repeated, his voice raised. "Hells hinges, you can't try me for somethin' I didn't do. Send for Whip Quinn. I want to talk to him."

Brady shook his head. "No, Tom, you're going into a cell, an' you'll do no talkin' to anyone—not yet. We'll find out what we want to know without yore help. Don't blame us later when you're in a jam. You've had yore chance to talk."

"I left 'em right outside the Occidental," Tracy blurted out. "Right away."

"When you told them we were lookin' for Curt French, what did they say?" asked Boone.

"Why, I dunno. I don't recollect hardly what they said." The cowboy's manner was sullen and reluctant.

"Said they were going to warn Curt, didn't they?"

"Maybeso."

"They did or they didn't. Which?"

"Why, yes, I guess they did."

For half an hour they grilled the harassed man. They got out of him all he knew, which was not very much. Then, in the presence of Hank Jacobs, the jailor, Tracy signed a statement covering the facts.

"Can I go now?" he asked.

"Sorry, Tom, but we'll have to hold you for the present," Brady said after a low-voiced consultation with Boone. "Don't worry. I reckon you're not in this."

"If I ain't in it, why can't I go?"

Brady did not tell him the real reason, which was that he would run at once to Whip Quinn with the story of what had occurred. Indignant and ill at ease, Tracy found himself locked in a cell for the night. It was, he felt, a high-handed outrage. He would sure tell Whip and have him bring these fellows to account.

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO MEN

HUGH McLENNON had gone back to the ranch, but his sister stayed in town as a guest of Eve Turley. Tilatha did not herself quite know why she was remaining. There were several factors contributing to her last-minute decision. One was the friendship which had sprung up between her and Eve. Brought up in a world of men, of rough, hard-riding cowboys almost as simple and elemental as the longhorns they drove, she had taken on the colour of her environment. There was a hard, metallic quality about her. She looked at facts without any of the indirection of her sex. Watching Eve, she realized that there was something she had missed, the soft and sheltered life that stresses feminity.

Always, vaguely, this clean, brown, fearless girl from the hills had known dissatisfaction with her primitive existence. She loved the mountains. It was a joy to her to be in a saddle riding the windswept hills. But she had wanted friends of her own sex, not the gaunt, tight-lipped wives of ranchmen, women who had been buffeted by the hardships of pioneering, but young girls full of laughter and whispered secrets, such as Eve Turley.

This gold-and-ivory Eve charmed her. There was a provocative unexpected quality about the girl. She could grow so enthusiastic about dress, so starry-eyed

over the colour of a ribbon, that Tilatha envied her. She bubbled with mirth regarding the young men she met, and mocked them to their faces so prettily that they came back for more.

Tilatha could not bring herself to go home yet because she felt, too, that the struggle of which Boone Sibley had become the central figure was moving to a swift and tragic climax. No longer did she deny to herself that he held her heart in that strong brown hand of his. He could crush it if he wished. Hourly he walked his light-footed way in great danger. Soon now the blow would fall, and when it struck him down she, too, would be stricken. She would, of course, go on living, but she would carry always in her bosom the dull ache that is close to despair.

The news of the death of Curt French came to her at first as a shock of relief. He had spread his threats broadcast. Now he was powerless to execute them. One great danger no longer confronted the man she loved.

She wondered how French had come to his death. There was some mystery about it. Apparently the sheriff and his deputy had cleared themselves, though there had reached her rumours that they knew more than they were telling. Logically, as far as she could see, they were the men who benefited most from his death. Perhaps they had tried to arrest him and had been forced to shoot when he resisted.

With Eve she called on her dressmaker for a fitting the morning after the bad man had been killed. They met Russ Quinn in front of Blum's photograph gallery.

At sight of Tilatha the man's dark eyes lighted. He had supposed she had left town with her brother.

"Glad to meet up with you," he told her. "Thought you'd gone home."

Miss McLennon rescued her hand and reminded him that there was another young woman present. "You're glad to meet Miss Turley, too, aren't you?" she suggested.

He smiled at the little blonde girl. "I reckon Miss Turley can understand when I say that there isn't any other lady present for me when I meet Til McLennon."

Eve clapped her hands. "Bravo! That's the nicest compliment I've heard since I came to Tough Nut." She nodded her head in vigorous approval. "And when I look at her I know why you feel that way."

"Happy to have yore endorsement, Miss Turley."

Her shy eyes flashed at him an audacious challenge. "I'm endorsing the sentiment, Mr. Quinn."

"I see, an' not the sentimenter." His bold eyes, reflecting careless amusement, met her gaze coolly. "Couldn't you go a little farther, miss? So's not to leave me quite heartbroke."

"No, sir." She shook her fair curls vivaciously. "Not the leastest mite. You're too wild and woolly for me."

"No hope for me a-tall. Have I got to start pinin' right off?" he derided.

"You'll have to ask Tillie that," she said wickedly.

Tilatha changed the subject. She did not want to discuss even in badinage Russ Quinn's feeling for her. He was out of the running, definitely, finally. She did

not understand now how she could ever have considered him as a husband. From that point of view Boone Sibley filled her horizon.

"Have you heard anything more about Curt French —who killed him, I mean?" she asked.

The muscles in his dark face tightened. "I don't need to know any more. Sibley an' Brady killed him."

"But they showed their revolvers to everybody in the room. They hadn't been fired."

"What leads you to think this Texas warrior ain't a two-gun man?" he demanded. "Brady, too, for that matter."

"They were searched by Mr. Hartley."

Quinn laughed unpleasantly. "So they were, after they had got rid of their second guns. That's an old dodge. An' tell me why this Texas man mentioned lookin' at his gun if he wasn't fixin' up an alibi."

"He knew he would be accused, since Curt French had been threatening him an' Mr. Brady. They did not leave the house. What became of the other guns, if they had two each?"

"Gimme a harder one," Quinn returned scornfully. "Why, they shoved 'em in a bureau—or under the bed —or beneath the mattress—till they shooed the crowd out. I notice they wouldn't let the boys come into the room an' look around."

"They couldn't do that till the coroner had seen the body," Tilatha protested. "You're unfair to them, Russ. You twist around everything they did."

"Bet yore boots they couldn't, not without someone finding the sixshooters. So they didn't take any chances.

They herded the crowd out an' fixed things to suit themselves."

"I don't believe it, not for a minute. Why should they? Curt French had threatened them both repeatedly. If he resisted arrest they had a perfect right——"

"An' if he didn't resist arrest? If he never got a chance to resist?"

Tilatha flung up her head and looked straight at him. "That wasn't the way of it. They're not that kind of men, either of 'em."

His black eyes narrowed. "You mean Sibley ain't that kind of a man," he challenged.

"I said both of 'em. I say it again. Why do you stick up for Curt French when you know what he was, Russ Quinn?" she asked indignantly.

"I know what this Sibley is, too. Up to date, he's sure had a lot of luck. First that business of Buck Galway an' the stagecoach robbery, then Jim Barkalow——"

"Jim Barkalow isn't dead, an' he isn't going to die."

"Then Curt French."

"That's not proved."

"If he gets by with that, too, he's certainly a good one. Listen, girl. He's struck twelve o'clock. He's through."

"I should think you'd be ashamed to mention Jim Barkalow—fifty of you against one."

"Against two," he corrected darkly. "I've not forgot that."

There had been the sound of footsteps clicking down the walk. Now Eve let out a little "Oh!" of dramatic alarm. Boone Sibley was striding directly toward them.

At the same moment Tilatha and Russ Quinn looked up and became aware of his approach.

The shotgun messenger spoke first, his voice harsh and insolent. "I've been tellin' Til McLennon that you an' Brady murdered Curt French," he called out.

Tilatha noticed for the first time how like a bird of prey this black Quinn was. He had the rapacious nose and the glittering eyes of a hawk. He seemed, at this instant, about to swoop down on his victim.

The eyes of the men actually seemed to clash, so hard and steely was the meeting of them.

"Then you've been tellin' her what's not true," the Texan countered. "An' I reckon you know it."

"Meanin' what, Sibley?" asked Russ, his body dangerously tense and motionless. "That I'm a liar?"

"Meanin' that we've got the killers locked up in jail."

Quinn forgot, in his astonishment, the anger that had been simmering to the boiling point. "Got 'em locked up! Who?"

"The men who killed Curt French. You notice I choose my words, Quinn. I don't know whether they murdered him or not."

"I asked you who you're talkin' about."

"So you did. Sing Elder and Brad Prouty."

"You've got 'em in yore jail—Sing an' Brad?" the express messenger demanded.

"Yes."

Quinn was amazed. He could hardly believe it. Yet he knew it was true if the Texan said so.

"How come they there? Who took 'em?"

"I did."

"When?"

"This mornin'. Half an hour ago."

"An' they didn't shoot you full of holes—either one of 'em?"

"Not so I noticed it. They were right sensible an' peaceable, once they had time to think it over."

"By God, I don't believe it."

"That's yore privilege, Mr. Quinn."

Russ glared at his enemy savagely. He wanted to break loose now and have it over with. He had no fear. He was game and hardy and self-reliant. If he reached for his sixshooter, he or this Texan whom he hated would be dead within a few seconds. But something held his hand. Was it the presence of the women? Was it his wish to consult Whip before he struck? He never knew.

Abruptly he turned on his heel and strode away.

Eve, white to the lips, stared at Boone. "I thought—I thought——"

She did not finish the sentence. Tilatha knew what she meant, for she had desperately feared the same thing—that he would strike here, regardless of them. Her imagination had heard the roar of guns, had seen the flash of fire, had felt the stab of bullets. She leaned sickly against an adobe wall, limbs and body lax. For the first time in her life she felt as though she were going to faint.

Boone looked at Tilatha. What he saw in her face made his voice gentle.

"It's all right," he told her.

"It's all wrong," she cried brokenly. "He nearly——"

"He was some annoyed," the man told her. "Can't blame him for being disturbed at bad news."

"Did they do it—Sing Elder an' Brad Prouty?" Tilatha asked. Her impulse was to divert him from her agitation.

"We think so. Looks thataway. A woman saw them going into the house where French roomed. That was five minutes before the shootin' began."

"But why should they kill him? He was one of their crowd, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but he was runnin' wild on them. They couldn't trust him, the way I figure it out. They had just got news that the sheriff was lookin' for French to arrest him again. Sing was in the stage hold-up with him. We know Sing had had trouble with the fellow at the Occidental. I'd guess French was makin' threats to spill the beans if he couldn't have things his way. Prouty an' Elder are thick as thieves. Maybe they called on French to make sure he'd keep his mouth shut, an' a quarrel flared up. We can't prove they went to kill him nor that they fired the first shot. We do know the only shot French fired went wild, as it might have done if he was badly wounded when he pulled the trigger. But there's an answer to that guess. He was using his left hand an' wasn't used to handling his sixshooter so."

"An' might have been trying to beat them to the draw," the hill girl added.

"Just that, an' in his hurry turned loose before he was ready."

"But if you think that, why arrest them an' make them an' the Quinns mad?"

"I didn't say I thought so. I said it might be like that. It's up to Elder an' Prouty to show self-defence if they can."

Tilatha shook her head. "I don't see why you couldn't let 'em alone. They can't be convicted. You know that. Why make trouble for yoreself?"

"We're law officers, Brady an' I. We've made up our minds to clean up this town, if we can. What kind of sheriffs would we be to let these fellows get away with this an' never even call for a showdown?"

"You don't have to go lookin' for trouble, do you?"

"We have to meet it when it looks for us. No use beatin' about the bush, Miss McLennon. We've served notice to the Quinn outfit that law has come to this town to stay."

"But suppose they—shoot you or something?" Eve asked, eyes wide with the thrilling horror of this drama.

Boone smiled at her naïve question. He thought it very probable they would, but not if he could prevent it.

"Yore uncle kept on writin' pieces in the *Gold Pocket* about conditions here even after one of 'em had shot him," he reminded her. "Someone has got to stand pat if ruffians aren't going to rule the roost."

The three of them had turned and were walking back to the Turley house.

"Tell me how you captured them," Tilatha said. "They're so—so lawless, both of 'em."

"Got the drop on both. I knew they were up till two-three o'clock at the Occidental an' would sleep late. So I dropped in an' waked 'em. Sing hadn't even bolted his door. He hadn't a chance to resist. The other fellow,

Prouty, came an' opened the door when I called. I gave the name of yore friend Russ Quinn to him. He was sleepy an' yawnin', so I had him, too. For a moment he had notions, but he changed his mind an' saw reason."

Tilatha made a little gesture of impatient despair. "If it would do any good, but they'll be out again soon walkin' the streets an' lookin' for you. Don't you know that? But of course you do."

"I know, too, that there's a change in the sentiment of this town," he told her. "Most folks here always were honest an' law-abiding, but they didn't dare protest. Turley played almost a lone hand. Now it's different. Men meet me on the street an' wish more power to us. The time has passed when the Quinns can run the town by high-handed methods."

"The time hasn't passed when they can shoot you down in the streets," Tilatha replied. "What's the use of saying that law is here when it is no such thing?"

"It's on the way. Don't you worry, Miss McLennon. The day of the Quinns is pretty near past, an' nobody knows it better than Whip Quinn. He won't give up without a fight. But he's fixed so he loses if he wins. Say he wipes me an' Brady out. Public opinion——"

She stopped and looked at him. He noticed for the first time the tawny flecks in the big brown eyes.

"Will public opinion bring you back to life after they have killed you?" she flung fiercely at him.

He was surprised at the passion in her voice. No reason was apparent to him for so much ferocity. The thing he was doing was only what had to be done. Even

she must realize that, untamed and wilful though she was.

"They haven't killed me yet," he told her grimly.

"No, but they will. Why do you come here an' mix up in this? It's not yore fight, but you hadn't got clear into town with yore mule team before you had started it."

"Struttin' around, I reckon," he murmured with a smile. "Me thinkin' myself a big man an' wantin' folks to talk about me."

She brushed aside his drawling quotation of her frank appraisal of him made at their latest meeting. "How you can stand there an' joke about it when you know, just as well as I do, that——" The hill girl broke off her sentence. Unexpectedly her throat had filled with a sob.

Boone looked at her in swift surprise. He saw the stormy rise and fall of her bosom. A flag of colour fluttered in her cheeks. Tilatha bit her lip, turned, and walked swiftly into the house. His amazed gaze followed her.

Eve looked at him, imps of mischief dancing in her blue eyes. "Mr. Sibley, would you like me to tell you something—real important?"

He shrugged broad shoulders. "I'm listenin'."

"Do you know what a duffer is?"

"A duffer! Why, a fellow who—who——"

"Exactly. Well, you're one."

And with that she turned and went flying into the house.

CHAPTER XXX

THE RUSS QUINN BRAND?

TO TILATHA came a grinning little coloured boy with a note. Having read this, she passed it to Eve.

"See how proper our wild man can be when he wants to," she said.

"I'd never have expected a formal invitation like this, all written out so pretty and neat," Eve admitted with a chuckle. "Even our villains don't run true to form, no matter how wild and woolly they are."

The note was couched in the phraseology conventional to time and place. It ran:

My dear Miss Tilatha:

May I have the pleasure of accompanying you to church tomorrow evening?

Your friend,
Russell Quinn.

"He never called me Miss Tilatha in his life," said the young woman who bore that name. "But I suppose, since I'm in town, he wanted to do this the way it ought to be done."

"Shall you go?" asked Eve.

"Yes, I'll go. I don't want to, and it won't do any good, but I can't afford to offend him," the hill girl said wearily.

Eve did not need to ask her why she could not afford to offend him. She understood that Tilatha's fear was for the man she loved; she did not want to inflame Quinn's passion against him by anything she might do.

So Tilatha sat down and wrote a staid little note in reply, to the effect that she would be very pleased to have Mr. Quinn escort her to church to-morrow evening, then gave it with a dime to the shiny-faced black boy, the while Eve lay curled on the bed eating chocolate creams.

"What do you s'pose he wants?" Miss Turley asked. "Course, I know he wants *you*. It stared out of his hungry eyes. But church, my dear! He doesn't *look* like a nice, quiet, churchgoing person, your tiger man doesn't. He isn't a deacon, is he?"

Tilatha laughed. "Not exactly. Church is the only place to take a young woman in this town. It's the proper thing to do for a young man who likes a girl. When he has been seen with her there several times, he has served notice that his intentions are serious."

"Hm! Your Quinn person doesn't have to serve notice that way, not to me, anyhow. And he wouldn't do anything so tame. I'd expect rather to see him ride up like young Lochinvar and snatch you away." Miss Eve sighed. "But men are disappointing, even the worst of them. Have another chocolate, dear."

Her friend took one, absent-mindedly, but it did not lift her gloom. During the night, contrary to custom, she had wakened several times, and her thoughts had been full of apprehension. She knew Russ Quinn, and to a lesser extent she knew his associates. They were

stark, ruthless men. When they struck, it would be certainly and finally. They might take their time, let days pass before they brought the quarrel to issue, but even if they did she could gather no hope from that.

And there was nothing she could do—nothing at all. She could only wait for the blow to fall. No law officers could be appealed to, since the contending factions represented what established order there was in town. Boone Sibley was as immovable as a great rock to any prayer she might make. He would go his own way, alert and fearless and apparently unperturbed, until the Quinns called him to account.

At noon, when Turley came home for dinner, he brought with him news. There had been a jail break when Hank Jacobs had gone to the cells of the prisoners in the morning. One of them had struck him over the head and knocked him senseless. Just how it had been done was not clear, but the keys had been taken from him and all prisoners released. Among these were two Mexicans, an ore thief, Tom Tracy, and Elder and Prouty. The last three had obtained horses and ridden out of town.

"They think Prouty did it," Turley went on. "Old Jacobs has been out of his head most of the time since, but he mentioned that name once."

"Is he badly hurt—Mr. Jacobs?" Tilatha asked.

"Yes. Dr. Peters can't tell how badly yet. He thinks there is a chance for him."

"Sheriff Brady an' Mr. Sibley weren't at the jail when it took place?" the hill girl asked, her eyes aflame with interest.

"No. They didn't hear of it for an hour. They have taken the trail after the escaped men."

"After Elder and the other two, you mean?"

"Yes. I saw Brady for a moment. He was not very sanguine about finding them. It is easy to lose one's self in the desert. The chase may last several days."

Tilatha drew a breath of relief. To pursue outlaws who might at any time turn on them and fire from ambush was not the safest occupation in the world, but it was less dangerous than to be in town with the Quinns on the warpath.

The editor talked during dinner about the jail break and its effect on the citizens of Tough Nut.

"A week or two ago there would have been no outspoken criticism of the Quinn crowd," he said. "It would have been taken for granted that they would do as they pleased. But there has been a change. Men are beginning to speak out and say we have had enough of the whole crew. Sibley is responsible for this, and he alone. His stand has showed people that the Quinns and their friends are not invincible."

"He's not either," Eve protested. "My uncle is the editor of a paper which stood out against these men before ever Boone Sibley came to town. I'm going to see he gets the credit he deserves."

"Your uncle would have been run out of town long ago if it had not been for Sibley," said Turley, smiling at her. "But you can keep right on sticking up for me, my dear. You have done your share, too, both actively and passively."

"I'd like to know how."

"By standing in front of the mob the other night and defending me. That is one way. Another is by merely coming to town; every good woman who arrives at Tough Nut makes it safer for decent people."

"That's true," agreed Tilatha. "Especially if the good women bring children with them. There's nothing so tames a wild town."

Eve watched her friend dress for church next evening. "I never saw you look so beautiful," she averred. "If this black Quinn has any blood in his veins, I expect to learn that he has flung you on a horse and taken you into the hills with him."

"A lot of good that would do him," Tilatha answered. "No, he's not such a fool, even though he won't like what I've got to tell him."

"You're going to tell him to-night then?" Eve's eyes bubbled with interest. The ways of a maid with a man, and vice versa, always intrigued her.

"He intends to make me tell him one thing or another. I wish he wouldn't. Why can't he see that—that——"

"That you prefer another man. My dear, no man wants to see that. It's not satisfying to his vanity."

"I didn't say I did." Tilatha replied, a deeper colour in her cheeks.

Russ Quinn was plainly of Eve's opinion in regard to Tilatha's good looks. He could not keep his sombre eyes from her. She was in a sprigged taffeta which billowed with ruffles below the waist. It was a new dress, made under the direction of Eve, and it suited the long supple lines of the girl from the Chiricahuas.

Tilatha slipped her arm under that of her escort and

stepped into the gathering darkness. As Quinn turned to the left instead of the right at the next cross street she glanced at him in surprise.

"We're not going to church," he said.

"Oh, aren't we?" she said docilely. "Where are we going?"

"For a walk. I've got something to say to you."

"We'd better not go far. If we go wandering about an' don't show up at church people might talk."

"Let 'em talk."

"Easy for you to say that, Mr. Russ Quinn," she answered lightly. "It's not you they'd talk about, but me. I'll go a little way with you, though."

"You're gettin' right fussy, Til. If we were at the ranch, you'd ride twenty miles with me after dark any time you'd a mind to."

"We're not at the ranch," she told him. "When we are at Tough Nut we must do as Tough Nutters do."

"Most generally I do like I want to, an' I've noticed you do the same," he told her carelessly.

"Yes, an' I've been wonderin' about that, Russ—whether we're right or not, I mean. Ever since I was a teeny little girl I've been set on having my own way. Mostly I've had it. Well, what good has it done me? I've overridden everybody that stood in my way, as though nobody but me had any rights. The consequence is that folks dislike me—at least they think——"

"The consequence is that you're a fine high-steppin' girl——"

"Which is only a polite way of sayin' that I've got a bad temper."

He laughed at that, pressing her arm against his side as they walked. "You're tempery, Red-head. I wouldn't have you any other kind since I aim to have the tamin' of that bad disposition. You be as ornery as you like to other folks, an' you an' me will step in harness together right friendly at a good fast clip."

Tilatha hurried on. She had not yet said all that was in her mind. Probably there was no use in saying it, but at least she would have done her best to let him know how she felt and to bring him to a reasonable consideration of their problem.

"That's just it, Russ. We've got no more right to click our heels an' hold our heads high than other folks. I've always acted as though I had, but I know that's just a form of conceit. We've always got to respect others' rights if we play fair, don't you reckon?"

She asked it impetuously, with a kind of desperate seriousness. It was a prelude to an appeal that she felt she had to make.

"We're sure havin' the sermon whether we went to church or not," he told the girl, smiling down at her a little derisively but still amiably.

"No, but really, Russ, isn't it true?" she pleaded. "I know I'm not the one to talk. I've always ramstammed through, as my father used to say. But things look different to me now. It's not the way to do."

He thought he knew why things looked different to her now. Another man had come into the equation of her life. The voice with which he answered her was harsh, the manner abrupt.

"Listen, girl. You'll find both brush rabbits an' pan-

thers out there." His arm swept out toward the darkness to indicate the desert and the mountains. "If you're a brush rabbit you play the game thataway; if you're a wolf or a panther, why that's different. All the little laws, they're for the rabbit tribe. You'll find lots of 'em right here in Tough Nut. But if you're strong enough an' game enough you make yore own laws. Question is, do you want to be a rabbit or don't you?"

"I don't want to be a wolf, Russ. But that doesn't force me to be a rabbit. There are all sorts of lovely creatures that are neither wolves nor rabbits."

"You can't buck the facts, girl. We're in the desert here, not back in Boston, if that's where yore sassy little friend comes from. There's one law out here. The strong get there, the weak go under. It's written over every arid acre between here an' yore ranch. There's nothin' but fight to it. Every bunch of greasewood, every shoot of ocotillo fights for water an' goes halfway to China for it. Every sahuaro an' catclaw has got its spines an' barbs. Why, the very foxes are made different, leaner an' tougher than others so they can live longer without moisture. Animals are at war one with another. They got to be to live. It's the same with us humans. We've got to play the cards the way they're dealt us. Me, I'm not allowin' to slink about an' sneak an' be on the dodge like most of the scurryin' tribe out there. When I'm challenged I fight."

"Yes, but you don't always have to carry a chip, do you?"

He frowned. "Spit it out, girl. Get down to brass tacks."

"I think we've got to change our way of lookin' at life, you an' me both, Russ." She put her hand on his arm with a friendly little gesture that begged him to meet her halfway. "We've got to learn to respect laws an' sometimes give way to the other fellow's point of view. Its kinda stupid to claim that we're above the laws that are made to help folks get along with each other."

He seized on one word of her argument and let the rest go. "The other fellow! That means Sibley. You're askin' me to give way to that Texas warrior. No, by God! He never saw the day when I'd give him a foot of the road, that bird." His voice was hoarse with anger. He strode up the footpath they were following, pushing forward so fast that she almost had to run to keep pace with him.

When he stopped, he was at the edge of an old prospect hole, one that had been deserted years before. It was in a district little frequented. Prospectors had tried their luck on the ridge and given up, since all the pay mines lay in the opposite direction from town. The lights of Tough Nut lay below them, to the west. Apache Street seemed to open up from the very foot of the hill where they stood. Yet Tilatha knew the near end of it was more than half a mile distant. Seen in the moonlight, the noise of its revelry blotted out, the place looked peaceful as old age.

He turned fiercely on her. "Til, you're makin' a fool of yoreself over that Sibley. I'm through. I won't put up with it. It stops right now."

The colour poured into the girl's tanned face. "If I am, that's my business," she flung at him.

"Anyone can see it. The way you're throwin' yoreself at him is plumb ridiculous."

She tried to hold in leash her temper. "How long have you been runnin' a young ladies' finishin' school an' teachin' deportment, Miss Quinn?" she taunted.

"If you had any self-respect——"

Her brown hands clenched. "Russ Quinn, if you dare say——"

"Don't try to bully me," he cried, moving a step nearer and looking straight into her furious eyes.

"Bully! That's a nice word for *you* to use," she panted, almost as though she had been running. "What else are you ever but a bully? You glory in it. You think that—that if you look at a woman she should come runnin' to you like a whipped cur. Bully, indeed!"

What she said did not trouble him. She could have made charges that would have stung, but this was not one of them. He knew that if he was a bully he had the courage to back his domineering manner. Indeed, he hardly heard what she was saying. But the challenge of her manner stirred the rapacious instincts of his predatory nature. The rise and fall of her stormy bosom, the breathing colour driven into the cheeks by strong emotion, the healthy vigour of her wild young beauty, all went to his head like strong drink. The blood drummed through his veins. His woman! In spite of hell and high water, he would have her, regardless of her rebellious will. As he had conquered fractious horses by spur and

whip, so he would subdue this defiant young spirit. She needed a master. He would be the man. Those eyes flashing fire at him would offer instead gifts of adoring love. The vital courage of her must be beaten down. Until she came to him with hands outstretched, he felt he would never know a moment's peace. She was to be his. She was to know herself his, body and soul.

Quinn caught her wrists in his sinewy fingers and held them fast, his eyes burning into hers. She did not try to free herself but faced him with a kind of fierce disdain, head up, gaze locked to his. His arms went around her and he snatched her close, kissing cheeks and lips and throat with an unleashed savagery.

Not even then did she resist. Her strength was powerless against his, and to oppose him would be to give him the satisfaction of a sort of victory. She held her body stiff and inert, gave no response whatever to his flaming passion.

So, for lack of fuel, the man's ardour died down. His arms relaxed, though he still held her and looked hungrily down into her face. When he spoke his voice was rough with feeling.

"You're mine, girl. You're wearin' the Russ Quinn brand. I'll kill any man that comes between me an' you."

She made no motion to free herself. Her arms hung by her sides. When he looked at her and heard her voice, he knew she had never been more remote, never since he had known her less his.

"If there wasn't another man in the world, I'd never be yours," she told him.

His heart felt as though drenched with ice water. This was not the hot-headed impulsive girl he knew. There was a cold finality in her voice. She looked at him like a strange judge who condemns a criminal without emotion. It came to him that he had lost her, that all his strength could not tear aside the barriers between them. And he thought of the man whom he held responsible for this.

"I'll kill him soon as we meet—to-night, if he's back," he said.

"Do you think you're God—or Satan?" she asked him.

"Him or me—right away," he said, his voice low. He was staring at her, but he did not seem to see her. Behind the girl, in the shadows of the night somewhere, was the man he had doomed.

She knew she had lost. No use to talk to him about the sacredness of life, no use to plead for this one man who was dearer to her than breathing. He would go his own tragic way, no matter what it might involve. Then, in a surge of feeling, she knew she could not bear to be with him another moment.

Quinn was standing with his back to the prospect hole scarce a yard from the edge. A cactus barred her way, and she had to pass close to him. He stepped back. The moon shone on his harsh, strong face. One moment he was there, an imminent threat to all the joy of her life, the next he had vanished, swallowed by the earth.

She gasped, starting back. The ground on the edge of the deserted mine had caved in and taken him down to the bottom of the hole with it.

CHAPTER XXXI

A HOT TRAIL

THE fugitives had no more than an hour's start on the sheriff and his deputy, but sixty minutes was as good as a week. They had taken the Benson road, which was pretty fair evidence that they were not going to Benson, since all three of the escaped prisoners had been on the dodge often enough not to leave a straight plain trail behind them.

A mule skinner freighting to Tough Nut had passed them, "ridin' hell-for-leather" as he put it. A covered wagon outfit a mile farther on the road had seen nothing of them. Evidently the outlaws had taken to the chaparral at some point between the two.

The officers backtracked slowly, checking up on the road. They picked up the trail again, but after the loss of a precious hour. It led east.

"Looks like the boys are headin' for the Chiricahuas," Brady said. "They'll find friends there, I shouldn't wonder. But not so many as they would have done a few weeks back. The cowboys feel kinda sore about Sing Elder killin' Buck Galway an' then tryin' to lay it on Dusty. Buck come from thataway an' was popular with the hill folks."

They rode cautiously, eyes and ears open, for they

did not want to run into an ambush. At present this was not likely, since the men they were after did not know their trail had been picked up.

Presently the sheriff and his deputy lost the trail in heavy brush.

"Just as well," Boone said. "We'll make better time without it. They're headin' straight for Galeyville, looks like."

The two men plodded on through the sun and the dust. Their throats were caked before they reached Galeyville, and their clothes were covered with white powder. Lather streaked the flanks of their mounts.

Stiffly they dismounted and bowlegged into the Silver Dollar saloon. They strolled in with apparent carelessness but with a very real wariness. Four cowboys were playing a game of stud. No others were present except the bartender, who nodded in a friendly way to the sheriff and stared with frank interest at Sibley. One of the cowboys ambled forward, the game suspended for a minute, and offered his hand to Boone with a grin.

"'Member me? Sandy Joe. Glad to meet up with you again, Mr. Sibley."

Boone shook hands. "Heard you'd been hurt—fallin' from a horse or something. You all right now?"

"Yep. False alarm. One o' the greasers creased me. No harm done. I was needin' a haircut, anyhow. Bullet didn't hardly break the skin."

"Good enough. Heard how Dusty's gettin' along?"

"Fine. Fine as the wheat. He was a right patient invalid for a spell, but his nurse has done gone to town,

an' the boy's rarin' to go again. He's still up at the McLennon ranch. Why don't you drop in an' see him? He'd be real pleased to see you."

"Here on business," Boone said in a low voice. "Under the sheriff's orders. Seen anything of Tom Tracy, Sing Elder, or Brad Prouty?"

Sandy Joe looked shrewdly at him. "They been up to some mischief—something new, I mean?"

"Charged with killin' Curt French, two of 'em."

"That sure must hurt yore feelings, if what all they say is true."

"My feelings don't figure in it. But that's not all. They broke jail this mornin' an' left old Hank Jacobs for dead."

"Killed him?" Sandy Joe asked eagerly.

"Not dead yet when we left. You know what we want, Joe. We think the three men came to Galeyville. Seen anything of 'em?"

The cowboy took a swift glance at the bartender and another at the card players. "Why, no. No, I haven't."

Boone understood that he was not getting the truth and that the cowboy might be willing to talk if they were alone. The sheriff was engaged in conversation with the bartender.

"We need fresh horses, Joe," he said, moving toward the bar. "Know where we can raise some *pronto?*"

They drank, discussing mounts. Sandy Joe suggested Pete Andrews as a possible source of supply.

"Store's closed," he added. "Show you his house."

They moved to the front of the saloon and passed

out. Boone asked a question, not changing his tone of voice or his indolent manner.

"How long ago?"

"Three hours. Stayed half an hour, got fresh horses, an' lit out."

"Went which way?"

"No idea. Find out for you. Be at Sanford's store in fifteen minutes. If they went north, I'll buy chewing; if south, it'll be smoking. Watch the way my right hand points when I yawn. . . . No, I don't know how much Andrews will want for 'em. He'll be reasonable, I'd say." This last for the benefit of a couple of men passing into the saloon.

"How *is* Barkalow gettin' along—the man I had to shoot?"

"Got nine lives, that fellow has, like a cat. Doc says he never did see a man get well so fast. He'll be out in two or three weeks more. Well, so long."

Boone went into the saloon again and joined the sheriff. Presently the two returned to their horses, and Boone told Brady what he had learned.

"Good. Didn't get a thing from the barkeep. Afraid to talk, I expect, especially with so many present. Well, let's drift over to Sanford's."

At the store they bought a few supplies. Sanford watched Boone for a few moments from the home-made desk where he was sitting, then moved forward to the counter, where the sheriff and his deputy were looking at a spur.

"I've been wonderin', Mr. Sibley, who's payin' for my

stock in the store damaged the other day," the merchant said.

Boone showed surprise. "Why, didn't the boys fix that up with you, Mr. Sanford?"

"No, they didn't. They took up a collection an' paid for new windows. But I'm not talkin' about the windows. Two good suits of clothes had bullet holes shot in them. Several sacks of flour an' grain were practically ruined. Do you think it right for me to have to stand the loss?"

"No, sir," Boone answered promptly. "The fellows that shot up yore stock ought to make the loss good. Maybe Russ Quinn would like to send in a contribution to the cause. I'd write to him about it."

"Here's my point, Mr. Sibley. I'm not rambunctious about this, y'understand. It won't break me if I have to make good the loss myself. But if you hadn't run into the store the stuff wouldn't have been spoiled. Isn't that so?"

The Texan considered. "Tell you what I'll do. Call in three of the boys. Say the first three that pass the store. We'll put it to 'em, an' I'll abide by their decision if you will. Is that reasonable?"

Sandford agreed.

Three cowboys passed a moment later. They were the ones who had been playing stud at the Silver Dollar. The merchant stated the case. Boone added a word or two. The jury retired to a corner of the store and consulted.

They presently came forward. "Verdict in," said one of them. "Jury finds Mr. Sibley not guilty but Sanford

had orta get damages. Wherefore jury agrees to raise the amount by unpopular subscription among the gents participating in the fireworks."

Boone smiled. "I participated to a certain extent, so I'll shell out ten dollars as my share," he offered, and at once tossed over a piece of gold to the chairman of the committee on restoration.

Into the store came Sandy Joe. "Glad you ain't closed yet, Sanford. Gimme a plug of the old reliable an' charge to yores truly," he said. The cowboy yawned, throwing wide his arms in a gesture of abandon. The fingers of his right hand pointed northwest. "That poker game has sure been runnin' steady last two-three days. I aim to get caught up on my sleep to-night for sure."

The foreman of the jury disagreed. "You think so. Different here. Betcha a dollar you're sittin' in before twelve o'clock midnight this very P. M. Either at the Silver Dollar or some other place."

"Take you, fellow. I can use that dollar."

The officers left the store and returned to their horses.

"Sandy Joe was pointin' right straight to the McLennon place," Brady said.

"In that direction, sure. What say we ride over there? We can get fresh horses at the ranch," Boone suggested.

"Might as well. Hard to tell where those fellows have holed up. I don't hardly reckon they'll be at the McLennon place."

"No, but Hugh may know something, or in the course of a day or so may hear where they're at. You know how news travels up here."

They took the road to the ranch, jogging along easily to rest their tired horses. The stars were out before they dropped into the mountain park where the ranch was set. They could see the lights gleaming from the house windows as they splashed through the creek. A young hound barked furiously at them and the Chinese cook came to the kitchen door.

"Hello the house!" the sheriff called. "Reckon we'll light, Charlie, if you can fix us up some grub."

"Me fixum," the yellow man promised.

A man flung open the front door. The man was Dusty Rhodes. "Don't shoot, whoever you are," he called cheerfully to them.

"Any other guests here except us, Dusty?" asked Brady.

"None, onless I'm one. Why? Are you allowin' to give Hugh an' me a surprise party? Dog my cats, if it ain't the Texas warrior!" He fell upon Boone and pounded him with both fists. His boyish face was alight with pleasure. "We was plumb low for excitement. Hugh an' me was debatin' whether I'd better massacree him or him me to stir things up."

"Come in, boys," invited Hugh. "Had any supper yet?"

"No. The chink's gonna fix us up some. When did you get toney an' set up a yellow boy for a cook, Hugh?" the sheriff asked.

"Til found him stranded in Galeyville an' brought him home. He was plumb down to the blanket. She was right busy, an', anyhow, she wanted to get away for a while. Charlie ain't permanent."

Hugh did not ask them why they had come or what they wanted. That was their own business. If they wanted to tell him they would do so in due time. Meanwhile, they were welcome to the best he had. Hospitality on the frontier is not a virtue but a matter of course.

They chatted in a casual fashion, mentioning to one another such news as might be of interest.

"I reckon you heard about Curt French gettin' shot," the sheriff said during a pause.

"Yep. Hugh was in town, you know. Good work, Texas man. Would suit me down to the ground if you'd have sent him to Boot Hill."

"Not referrin' to that. I reckon you're suited, Dusty. You haven't heard about him gettin' killed, then?"

"No. Who shot him?" Dusty asked quickly.

"We don't rightly know," the sheriff answered nonchalantly. "Evidence points to Sing Elder an' Brad Prouty. So we arrested 'em on suspicion."

"But, great ginger mills, what in Mexico would they bump Curt off for?" demanded the cowboy.

"Seems they had had a quarrel," Grady said. "Curt got right troublesome to his friends, I shouldn't wonder."

"So you've got Sing an' Brad in yore calaboose," Hugh made comment. "I expect that will rile 'em some."

"My teacher usta tell me I got my tenses all mixed, Hugh," the deputy explained. "You're thataway, too. We had 'em, but we haven't got 'em now. There was a jail break this mornin', an' right now the county doesn't have to feed any of its guests."

"A jail break!"

"Hank Jacobs got careless, an' they hit him over the

head with a piece of iron pipe. Fractured his skull, looks like."

"Bad medicine," said Hugh. "An' the prisoners lit out?"

"Three got horses," the sheriff said. "Sing an' Brad an' Tom Tracy."

"Tom. Was he in the Curt French killin'?" asked Dusty.

"Not in it. A material witness."

There was a moment of silence while Hugh and Dusty disgested the news. They did not need to wonder any longer what Brady and his deputy were doing here. The officers were after the escaped prisoners.

CHAPTER XXXII

"STICK 'EM UP"

NONE of those present said instantly and frankly what was in his mind. The subject was a delicate one and recognized as such.

McLennon approached it indirectly. "So they made their getaway. Wonder which way they headed."

"They were in Galeyville three-four hours ago," the sheriff said, rolling a cigarette. "Our information is they was movin' kinda toward Cochise Head. How about fresh mounts, Hugh? Ours are played out."

The eyes of the sheriff and the rancher met. Brady was asking a good deal, and he knew it. McLennon was surrounded by rustlers at outs with the law. To supply horses to officers on the trail of criminals would be regarded by many as an unfriendly act, even though the men wanted had not been engaged in cattle or horse stealing. Hugh knew this. If he did what the sheriff asked, he would be aligning himself squarely with the law against those who went their own wilful way. But he realized that the present conditions could not endure. Law must come to the mesquite. Long ago he had made up his mind to help bring this about at the proper time.

"I can let you have horses," he said.

"Good." Brady smiled wryly. "I ain't sure they'll do us any good. Be like findin' a needle in a haystack

to run these fellows down in the hill pockets around the Head."

Dusty looked at McLennon. His eyes asked a question.

"Go ahead, Dusty," his host said. "Shoot yore wad. It's a free country. I'm not coverin' for these scalawags. Time honest men showed their colours."

"They're makin' for the Clear Spring cache, looks like," Dusty told the officers.

"My guess, too," agreed Hugh.

"Could a fellow find this cache?" the sheriff asked casually.

"Not onless someone took you there. It's hidden in the hills."

"Think we could get a guide?"

Hugh spoke with studied indifference. "Maybe so. When you want to go?"

"Right damn now. Soon as we've eaten, anyhow."

"Are you askin' for a posseman or for a guide to the hole-up?"

"All we want is a guide. Soon as we reach the cache he can cut his stick."

"I reckon I might find you one," the ranchman said.

No promise of secrecy was given or asked, but all those present understood it was implied. Hugh lived in the country and expected to continue to do so. He could not afford needlessly to make enemies.

After supper horses were roped and saddled. Hugh had not said who the guide was to be, but he swung on the third horse and led the way over the hills.

The country they traversed was rough and broken. It was seamed with gulches and scarred by rock slides.

The riders went up breakneck hills and slithered down pitches covered with loose rubble. They wound in and out through arroyos running in all directions. But Boone noticed that McLennon never hesitated. He knew exactly where he was going.

They climbed, steadily, after the first two miles, coming at last to a ridge looking down a wooded slope. Along this ridge the ranchman led them. For perhaps a half mile they followed it before he stopped.

"See those two rock spires ahead," he said. "Go between 'em an' dip sharply to the right. You'll find yoreselves in the cache."

"We'll not forget this, Hugh," the sheriff promised. "*Adiós.*"

The officers went on alone. They passed between the spires as directed, swung down a precipitous slope, and found themselves entering a gateway to a small park. In the moonlight a corral could be seen, and presently a lighted cabin nestling on the edge of timber.

"We'll tie here," the sheriff said, swinging from his horse.

The officers crept forward on foot. They approached the cabin from the timber in the rear.

Boone reached the window first, raised himself, and looked inside. Three men were in the room, Elder, Prouty, and Tracy. They were playing cards by the light of a tallow candle stuck in a beer bottle. Even as Boone looked, Tracy dealt a hand, rose, and walked to the door.

The Texan did not stop to discuss with the sheriff what must be done. He ran swiftly around the house,

jerking out his sixshooter on the way. Tracy was standing in front of the house, his back to it, a few yards from the door, which was partially closed.

At the sound of footsteps he turned lazily. Evidently he thought one of his friends had come out of the house. He started to speak, then stopped, mouth open and eyes bulging. A revolver in the hands of Boone was pressed against his stomach.

The cowboy swallowed hard. This was the last thing in the world he had expected.

"Don't speak—or move," the Texan advised in a whisper.

The sheriff came around the corner of the house and in one glance took in the situation.

Boone held up two fingers and pointed to the house. Brady nodded, stepped to the door, and walked inside. His sixshooter was in his hand.

One of the men at the table had his back to him, the other sat in profile.

Elder spoke. "We're waitin' for you, Tom." Then he looked up and made a motion to rise.

"Stick 'em up!" the sheriff ordered. "Both of you."

Both men stared at him stupidly, as though their brains had not yet functioned clearly enough to understand what had taken place. Neither of them put his hands up, neither made any gesture toward any offensive.

Brady watched them closely. He did not expect any trouble now, since he had the drop on them. They were too old at the game for that. But he knew that the least wavering of the eye might be fatal.

"Reach for the roof, boys," the officer said sharply. "No foolishness."

Elder found his voice first. "This some of Tracy's work?" he asked, with an oath.

"Get yore hands up! *Pronto!*" Brady's voice had a whip-lash sting.

Four hands went up reluctantly.

Tracy came into the house, followed by the deputy.

Prouty looked venomously at the Texan. "So you're in this," he snarled.

"Collect the hardware, Sibley," the chief officer said. "Throw the guns on the bed for the present."

Boone did as directed.

"Put on the cuffs," Brady continued. "Look out, fellows. Don't make any break, or you'll sleep in smoke."

The three men submitted to be handcuffed.

Sing Elder turned on Tracy. "You claimed this was so safe—nobody knew yore hole-up but friends. If you've sold us out, fellow——"

"Don't get on the prod, Sing. I dunno howcome this any more'n you," Tracy protested sulkily.

"You'd better not," growled Prouty.

Neither of the officers volunteered any information. If their prisoners got to quarrelling among themselves, they were likely to tell more than they should. There might be mutual recriminations and accusations, out of which might come the discovery of which one had struck down the jailer.

Elder, the shrewdest of the prisoners, realized this and changed his manner. "Might as well make the best of it, boys. I don't reckon Tom has had anything to do with

this. Fact is, I don't see how he could, since he's been with us all day, Brad."

"Any fool could see that," Tracy said bitterly. "You got no more right to blame me than I have you. Come to business, not as much, because——"

The cowboy cut his sentence off without saying what was in his mind. But Boone could have made a pretty good guess as to the unspoken part of it. The man had been about to say that he was not as much to blame for the trouble they were in because he had not slugged Hank Jacobs.

"No need going into that," Elder admonished. "Far as that goes, I'd as lief go back to town as not. Like to get this thing cleared up for good."

"What thing?" asked Brady.

Elder turned his cold, wary eyes on the sheriff. "Why, whatever you claim to have against us. We know you, Brady. You've thrown in with our enemies, an' you're trumpin' up whatever you can against us."

"Nothin' to that, Sing," the sheriff denied amiably. "No sense in blamin' me because yore own bullheadedness gets you-all into trouble. You know doggone well I've got to make these arrests."

"We know you're runnin' with this Texas killer. You two an' Turley are tryin' to get control of Tough Nut. Because we won't stand for it, you're abusin' yore position of sheriff to hound us."

"Have it yore own way, Sing. I don't aim to start any debatin' society here. Now, we'll have to fix up some way to sleep our little family. How about blankets, boys?"

The sheriff and Boone took turn about sleeping. Their

prisoners were handcuffed, but they had to be watched. A moment of relaxed vigilance might give one of them the chance he was looking for.

The night wore away. Light sifted into the sky. The sleeping men woke, three of them stiff and cramped from the constrained position in which they had been forced to lie.

Boone lighted a fire in the stove and started to prepare breakfast.

"You better step out an' look up mounts, Sibley," the sheriff said. "Guess you better rope an' saddle while I fix up some grub."

Prouty had got out an old greasy deck of cards, and the three prisoners were sitting at the table, still handcuffed, playing seven up.

"Got to have that table in a minute, boys," Brady said. "Finish yore game, though. I'll mix up a batch of flapjacks first."

The sheriff's sixshooter was in his way as he worked. He took it from where it hung by his side and thrust the barrel into the leg of his boot.

Boone hesitated a moment. It was in his mind to tell Brady to be careful while he was away. But why? The sheriff presumably knew his business and did not want any advice from a young deputy of not one fifth his experience. Anyhow, the prisoners were handcuffed. Apparently they were intent on their game. The deputy left the house and started for the corral.

"I'm against that fellow every turn of the road, Brady," said Elder harshly. "Don't see why you cotton to him. . . . High, low, an' game. Tom gets jack."

"He's all right," Brady said cheerfully. "Wouldn't want a better man with me, Sing." He was pouring flour into a tin pan. "I reckon you boys have got good healthy appetites."

"Yep." Sing was dealing the cards awkwardly on account of his bound wrists.

Presently Brady had his pancakes mixed and moved to the stove.

The cabin was small, and the table where the players sat was to the right of the stove, about three feet from it. Brady dropped the dough into two frying pans sputtering with grease. He kept an eye on the prisoners, never turning his back on them. The cuffs jingled as they gathered and played their cards. He was glad to see that they appeared in a more amiable frame of mind than last night. Sing Elder especially seemed to be taking the arrest philosophically.

"Makes game, boys," he said to the others. "That's a dollar six bits you owe me, Tom. You an' me are square, Brad."

"No such a thing," Prouty protested. "You owe me four bits, Sing. There was six bits comin' to me from the other game, an' now——"

Elder, shuffling the cards carelessly, dropped one and stooped to pick it up. He fumbled awkwardly for it. With his shackled hands he could not easily reach it and pushed his chair back toward the stove. Swiftly his hands lunged out and snatched at the butt of the .45 sticking from the sheriff's boot leg.

Brady was not a quick man. His brain and muscles coördinated one instant too late. Elder had the six-

shooter in his grip before he woke to action. The sheriff dived for his wrist and closed on it. They struggled, Brady to keep the barrel pointed down, the outlaw to raise and fire it.

Prouty rose heavily, flinging down the bench upon which he sat. He and Tracy closed with the officer. A shot rang out and a bullet crashed into a wall of the cabin. Prouty raised his arms and brought down his wrists upon the temple of the sheriff. Struck by the heavy iron, Brady swayed on his feet, fell against Elder, and slid to the floor.

"Gimme the sixshooter," Prouty called to Elder. "Quick. I'll finish his business."

"No need of that," Elder answered. "Find his keys, Tom. In that right-hand pocket. We got to get these cuffs off."

Tracy stooped, fumbling for the keys. It took him several seconds to find and drag them out.

"Here they are, Sing. We got to hustle."

The door was flung violently open. Boone Sibley burst into the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A FRACAS

BOONE walked out to the corral and got his rope. He stepped inside the fence and adjusted the loop. The wary horses had already edged over to the farther side of the inclosure. Boone moved slowly forward, the rope snaked out, and the loop fell true over the head of a sorrel gelding. Not knowing which outlaw owned the horse, he chose the first saddle that came to hand.

The animals began to circle the corral once more as soon as he stepped toward them, lariat in hand. Boone missed his next cast, arranged rope and loop, and caught a round-bellied bay. This, too, he saddled. He had just finished tightening the cinch when a shot sounded.

The sound had come from the cabin. His reaction was instantaneous. As he ran toward the house he dragged out a revolver. The chances were ten to one that Brady had not fired the shot, and even if he had, it was because trouble had started. He had been careless. One of the prisoners had found the opportunity for which he was looking, had perhaps got his fingers on some gun hidden in the bedding. . . . Or Brady, taken by surprise, had been forced to defend himself.

The Texan had no time for strategy or finesse. He plunged at the door and flung it open. A bullet struck

the jamb close to his shoulder. Sing Elder, hands still shackled, had fired at him. Almost without breaking his stride the deputy charged him. In that fraction of a second he had seen that the sheriff was down, that the prisoners were still handcuffed and two of them unarmed. He might have played it safer by killing. He chose, if he could, to take his men in alive.

The barrel of his Colt's struck Elder's forearm, but not before another bullet had crashed into the wall. The gambler's weapon fell. With a side sweep of a foot, Boone kicked it under the stove as he braced himself to meet Prouty's rush.

The fellow was powerful and heavy-set. His drive was intended to fling the deputy back upon the stove. Boone dodged the full force of it by sidestepping and clinching with Elder. Prouty plunged into the stove, and the pipe came clattering down.

By this time Tracy, too, was lumbering into action. His arms were raised, to use the handcuffs for a weapon. Past the shoulder of Elder the Texan drove a hard left into the man's unprotected face. For the moment it stopped him completely.

Elder had seized Boone's right wrist. The deputy struggled to free it, for Prouty was gathering himself up from his frustrated assault. Elder was big and strong. His grip was like living steel. The deputy's left hand went to the man's face. The heel of the palm caught under the chin and thrust upward and back. The finger searched for the eyes. With a howl of pain Elder fell away from the torture, releasing the wrist. Boone's right arm rose and fell. The heavy barrel crashed against

the man's forehead. Elder swayed against a bunk and collapsed upon it.

Just in time Boone got out from the corner where he was. With a roar of anger Prouty flung himself at the young officer. Still Boone did not fire. Without looking down, he felt an overturned stool brushing against his leg. He gave ground, inching the stool into Prouty's path. The man stumbled, caught at Boone's waist with his bound hands, almost dragged the deputy down with him. Boone was flung against a wall.

The Texan hung there, breathless and shaken. But the day was won. Elder rolled over, trying to rise. Prouty had fallen hard, his head under a bunk. In cuffs, he found it difficult to get out and rise. Tracy had backed away, his hands up.

Brady was sitting up, his hand to his head. He looked at the red stains that covered it, then at Boone, with an odd chagrined humility. "I got careless, Texas man," he said.

Boone spoke sharply, to Prouty and not to his chief. The man was awkwardly getting to his feet.

"Line up beside Tracy. Don't you even look like fight or I'll shoot you down."

Prouty glared at the young Texan. His mouth was a thin, cruel line below the drooping moustache. The sullen eyes burned with hatred. But he knew when he was beaten. He slouched across the room and joined the cowboy.

"No breakfast here now," Boone said, glancing at the smoking stove. "What say we go to the McLennon ranch an' get a hand-out, sheriff?"

"Just as you say, Sibley:" The sheriff recovered his weapon. "I sure played a good hand mighty bad. Hadn't been for you, I'd have had to go sneakin' back without my prisoners. Well, a fellow lives an' learns. I'm an old dog, but that was sure a new trick I picked up from Sing."

Elder was sitting on the bed nursing his head. "We was all shackled. Hadn't been for that it would have been different." He looked at Boone sulkily. "I'd like to meet you on even terms somewhere, Texas man. Gimme a chance an' I'll show you up."

"We'd better all go out an' finish saddling," Boone suggested to his chief, "after you've tied up yore head."

"I reckon," Brady agreed. He was quite dispirited. What had just taken place was a reflection upon his capacity as an officer. He had just missed disgrace by a hair's breadth, and by no merit whatever of his own.

He rose from the stool on which he was sitting and moved toward the water pail.

"Need any repairs, Sing? I'll fix you up if you do," Boone said curtly.

"You touch me an' I'll beat yore brains out," Elder promised viciously.

"Which is a polite way of sayin' 'No, thank you,' I reckon," Boone said. "Well, it's yore head an' not mine. Have it yore own way."

He tied up the sheriff's wound, a watchful eye on the prisoners. This done, the party adjourned to the corral. Fifteen minutes later they were riding up the slope that led to the spires.

It was a sorry-looking party that forded the creek

and rode up to the McLennon ranch house. That active five minutes in the shack had damaged the appearance of several of its members. His wound still unwashed and unbound, Elder looked much worse than he actually was. Prouty had cut open his cheek when, in falling, he had struck the edge of the bunk. The sheriff's bandaged head was frank admission that he had been through battle.

Dusty followed Hugh to the porch. He took one sweeping glance at the riders.

"Meet a cyclone on the way, boys, or anything?"

"No, Dusty," the Texan answered. "Some of us had a few ideas, but we've got over 'em now. The sheriff an' I persuaded them to play our way. . . . Can we get some breakfast here, McLennon?"

"Sure. I'll speak to Charlie."

"We been through ours two hours. Wasn't there any grub where you-all come from?" asked Dusty.

"We kinda kicked the apple cart over amongst us," Brady said. "We spent the night in a shack up a ways in the hills, but I noticed about breakfast time we didn't seem hungry. Too busy. Still, at that, don't forget we're full-grown men when you turn that order in to Charlie, Hugh."

They dismounted. The sheriff ranged his prisoners in a row on the porch and watched them while Boone and Dusty took care of the horses. While breakfast was being prepared, Hugh McLennon gave first aid to Elder. This done, he turned toward Prouty.

"How about you, Brad?"

Prouty looked angrily at him. "All I want from you is

water. I'll 'tend to this cut. If anyone asks you, I tripped up. That's how I got it. That ain't all, Mr. Hugh McLennon. You claim to be our friend. Well, I see what I see. These fellows come right to our hang-out, straight as a crow flies. They're on horses wearin' yore brand. Someone brought 'em there. By God, I can guess who."

Hugh McLennon was no faint-heart. He had put up more than one gun fight when forced to it. It was known all over the country that he "had sand in his craw." Now he looked grimly at Prouty, eyes steady and cold. When he spoke it was after he had come to an important decision.

"What do you mean I claim to be yore friend, Prouty?" he asked. "I know you by sight. I know the name you go by. Does that make me yore friend? If you want to know, I'm particular who my friends are."

"I've heard about rats an' a sinkin' ship, Hugh," Elder jeered.

The poet Joaquin Miller once said about the 'Forty-niners, "The cowards never started, and all the weak died on the road." This was not literally true of the Argonauts any more than it was of the early Arizonians, but it held more than a kernel of truth. These pioneers were men and women who had fought Indians, drought, hunger, and the lawless depredations of their own race. Most of them were hard and weather-beaten and virile. Hugh McLennon was a leader among those with whom he had cast his lot, and he had won preëminence by the strength in him.

His bleak look met Elder's sneer steadily.

"You're beginnin' to hear about the law, too, Sing," he said. "It's come into this country, an' it's come to stay. I'd advise you to think about that. I'm on that side. I'm against sculduddery an' promiscuous killings an' stage robberies. When the sheriff of this county comes to me an' asks for horses to go about his business of runnin' down men wanted for crime, as a decent citizen I give him mounts to help him on his way. When he asks me to guide him through this country with which I'm acquainted, I guide him. I'm not concerned with whether that suits you or not."

"You talk mighty big. Get down to cases. Do you claim I've done any promiscuous killin' or robbed any stages?" Elder demanded.

"I don't know a thing about that," came Hugh's prompt retort. "All I know is that the law charges you with crime. That's enough for me. You'll have chance enough to prove yoreself innocent."

The pigtailed head of the Chinese cook appeared at the kitchen window.

"Bleakfast all leady," he announced.

Recrimination ceased. The men filed into the house, sat down, and began to stow away corn bread, bacon, eggs, and coffee.

CHAPTER XXXIV

TILATHA MAKES A DECISION

TILATHA looked down into that black hole, standing as near the edge as she dared. She had no idea how deep it was, no assurance as to whether Russ Quinn was dead or alive.

In a faint voice she called down: "Russ—Russ."

There was a sound, as though of something stirring. Then an answer to her call, if it might be called an answer, for what she heard was a deep-throated curse.

"You're not hurt?" she cried.

"No. Shaken up. Go get help to haul me out."

"Yes," she promised. "I'll not be long."

She turned and ran down the ridge toward the road. But she did not run more than a hundred yards. There had come to her the memory of his threat, to kill Boone Sibley this very night if the Texan had returned to town. She could not rescue him without condition, knowing what he meant to do. She stood, thinking, then walked slowly back to the prospect hole.

"Russ," she called down.

"Meet someone to send to town?" he shouted up.

"No. Listen. I want you to promise not to hurt Mr. Sibley. He's not lookin' for any trouble with you. Let him alone."

His voice was hoarse with anger. "You go down to

the Occidental an' tell Whip what's happened to me. Dirt's tricklin' in here right along. An' hurry, too."

"No, but, Russ, listen! You're all wrong about him if you think he's interested in me. He's not. He never looks at any woman. Hates them all, or at least doesn't know they're on earth. If you'd be reasonable, if you'd understand——"

"Don't stand there arguin' with me, girl. You light out pronto an' get Whip. No use tryin' to bully me into any promises. I'm intendin' to get that Texan—right away."

She pleaded with him, eagerly and forlornly and at times passionately. The only effect was to increase his rage.

"How can I have you brought up from there when you tell me that you want to get out to kill a man—one who saved me from a bunch of Mexican raiders? Don't you see I can't, Russ? It would be like me being a party to it. If you'd only be human—like other folks." Her voice broke a little.

"Can't you ever learn to mind yore own business?" he burst out. "I never saw such a girl. Always got to run things. If you were mine, I'd lay a horsewhip across yore shoulders. By thunder, I would. You're the most aggravatin' little fool——"

He stopped, from sheer exasperated inadequacy of expression.

"Not the least bit reasonable," she said hopelessly. "Can't you see my position, Russ? If I had you hauled up while you're in that state of mind it would be just

like turning a raving maniac loose with a sixshooter. I can't do it—I can't."

"You do like I say, an' do it right away. Don't you stand there dictatin' to me what I'm to do." He ripped out a sudden furious imprecation.

There was no use talking further with him. Tilatha turned away and walked slowly back to town. She did not know what to do. There seemed no way out of the situation, none that had any promise of hope. Very likely he might stay there days without being discovered, or, on the other hand, someone might hear his shouts before the night was out. She could take food and water to him, but she could not tell that there would not be another cave-in of loose earth that would bury him completely.

Eve and her uncle were in the parlour. Turley was reading, and his niece was playing on the organ. At Tilatha's entrance Eve wheeled to face her.

"Must have been a short sermon," Miss Turley said.

"We didn't go to church," her friend said. "We took a walk instead."

The girl on the organ seat flashed a quick look at her. Tilatha looked depressed and worried. That the situation had been threshed out, and to a conclusion not satisfactory to her guest, Eve knew without having to be told in words. But she asked no questions Probably Tilatha would tell her what had taken place after they went to their bedroom to retire.

"Where did you go?" Eve asked, to make conversation.

"Oh—around!" the hill girl said wearily. She took off her hat and sat down on the sofa.

"You look tired," Turley said. "It's been hot to-day. Perhaps some lemonade, Eve?"

His niece nodded vigorously. "It's still hot. You get the best ideas, Uncle Tom."

There came a knock at the door. Eve opened to let in Dr. Peters.

He sat down in a rocking chair.

"How is poor Mr. Jacobs?" Eve asked.

"Doing very well. The skull isn't fractured. He isn't out of the woods yet, but unless complications arise he should continue to improve."

"I'm very glad to hear it. I suppose we'll not see anything more of the ruffians that did it for some time," the editor said.

"You think not?" The doctor looked at him, a humorous gleam in his eye. "Haven't you any confidence in our sheriff?"

"They'll hide out in the chaparral," Turley replied. "Very little chance of finding them, unless Brady settles down to make a long hunt of it."

"If that is an editorial opinion, I'm glad you haven't put it into print yet," the doctor mocked. "Brady and Sibley reached town twenty minutes since with three prisoners."

Turley sat up. "What prisoners?"

"Some outlaws by the name of Prouty and Elder and Tracy."

"Where did they find them?"

"In the hills somewhere. Near Cochise Head."

"And these men surrendered without a fight?"

"I took a look at a couple of broken heads. Brady has one of them, Elder the other."

"Boone Sibley?" asked Tilatha. The words came as though almost without her own volition.

"Oh, that young man bears a charmed life. But I dressed his wounded hand again. He used it in the scrimmage."

"I've got to go to him—at once," Tilatha said, rising from the sofa. "It's very important."

The doctor looked at her and read the agitation she was suppressing. He judged that if Miss McLennon said her business was important it was likely to prove so. She was not a young woman given to hysteria.

"I don't know where he is, but we can find him," Peters answered. "Very likely he is at a restaurant or at the Dallas House. Let me be your escort, young lady."

"If you will, Doctor, please," Tilatha responded. "I —I must see him, just as soon as I can."

Eve felt sure that her friend's agitation and her urgent need to see Boone Sibley had something to do with what had taken place between her and Russ Quinn during their walk. The girl walked across the room to Tilatha and said to her in a low voice, "Do you want me to go with you, dear?"

Though Tilatha did not need her, she would not repulse the kind impulse. "If you'll come along, dear, I'd be glad."

They found Boone at the Dallas House. He was washing up for supper, but he came down to the hotel parlour

as soon as he had finished. Dr. Peters and Eve withdrew to the porch.

"I had to see you—to tell you something," Tilatha explained, as soon as the two were alone.

Her heart was behaving queerly, as it always did nowadays when she was with this quiet brown man. She felt love pouring through her strong young body. His steady eyes seemed to plunge deep into her, to set fluttering pulses of quivering emotion. He said nothing, waiting for her to define her errand. That was like him, she thought, characteristic of his reticent force.

"About Russ Quinn," she went on. "He wants to kill you—to-night—as soon as you meet."

"Where is he?"

"He has fallen in a prospect hole. I thought—before we let him out——"

"How did he fall in?"

"I was with him. We took a walk there. He wanted to talk. Then he told me he was going to kill you—an' he fell in."

"Is he hurt?"

"No. I tried to get him to promise not to hurt you." The colour beat through her skin in a rich tide. "But he's gone crazy about it. I had to tell you. What will you do?"

"Defend myself," he said quietly. "Have you sent anyone to get him out?"

"I wanted to see you first—to tell you what he's threatening."

His immobile face told nothing. She did not know how much he had thought of her these last days, how in the

watches of the night he had seen her, stormy, gallant, aglow with life, or perhaps shining with a soft and gentle warmth. She did not guess how he admired her fine, healthy, vigorous body, built up by years in the open.

"That's right good of you," he said gently.

"You won't go away?" she asked, without much hope.

"No, I won't go away."

"But you're not a killer like they say you are. You don't want to kill or be killed. Surely you don't."

"No."

"Then go away. Just for awhile. It's awful to stay—an' wait for him."

He smiled grimly. "Tell *him* to go. I'm makin' no threats. I'm going about my business, lookin' for no trouble. He's the one you'd better argue with, don't you reckon?"

She caught her hands together for a moment. "Oh, I have. But he—he won't listen."

"Then you've done all you can, Miss McLennon. An' I thank you for yore kindness."

"My kindness!" She cried the word bitterly. "I could wish that the sides of the hole would cave in an' bury him. What right has he got to talk about killing another human being? God gives life. I think——"

"Is the hole cavin' in on him, or likely to?"

"I don't know. It's loose around the edges. If it does——"

He interrupted again: "We'll get a rope an' some men. Maybe there's no time to lose. Meet you at Turley's in fifteen minutes."

"You're not going yoreself?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"No. You don't know what he'll do when he sees you. I won't have it." She spoke a little wildly.

"First thing is to get him out. Prob'ly that will be easy enough. After that—oh, well!" He shrugged his broad shoulders.

Tilatha found herself walking beside him along the sidewalk. A tumult stirred in her blood as she kept step. He moved like a young Greek god come back to earth. Instinctively, matching his pace, her legs reached out resiliently, with an untamed joyous freedom born of muscles perfectly coördinated. She begged no more, surrendered her will to his. What must be must be. A lift of the spirit glowed in her. After all, the future was in God's hands. In spite of all his pride and arrogance Russ Quinn sat in the bottom of a hole, helpless as a child, waiting for someone to come and rescue him, while she walked beside the man she loved, the clean, brown, straight man who passed through life so fearlessly without regard to those who, like wild beasts, were ready to pounce for the kill.

He left her at the corner, and she went alone to her friend's house. It had been in despair that she had gone to him, the threat of what was to come hanging heavily over her soul; but some quality in his strength had blown away her fears, as a breath of wind does the morning mists. Now she moved eagerly, deep-bosomed and supple-limbed, no longer afraid. What was it about him that made everybody so sure of him?

His eyes, maybe? They were so level and steady.

flinging out no flags of flurry. Out of them looked the man's character. They promised, if he was your friend, to go all the way with you, to ride hard and risk much, to see you through your trouble, never to give up as long as there was life. But there was more than that. Her brother Hugh's blue eyes said all that. So did those of a dozen cattlemen she knew. Dusty Rhodes, for instance. But when she thought of Dusty she did not walk a feather-footed trail, she did not know that of all the men she had ever met he was the king, her heart did not sing a song of rapture.

Tilatha laughed a little, breathlessly. She whispered to herself, without words, "I love him . . . I love him." With a fine rapture her shining eyes looked up at the stars. For the first time she knew the ecstatic shock of a maiden's plunge into the wonderful pool of love.

CHAPTER XXXV

BOONE PUTS A ROPE AROUND HIS WAIST

IS HE going to pull that man out of the hole to let him shoot him?" asked Eve, wide-eyed.

"I don't know. He's going to pull him out," Tilatha answered.

"But—if the man says he's going to kill him——"

"Boone doesn't pay any attention to that. He never does. He acts as though he couldn't be killed, as though these men who threaten him were children. He always did go his own way, even when he was just a little, little boy. I told you how he rode alone through the Indian country to the buffalo hunters' camp—an' he was just big enough to carry a gun. My father tried to stop him, but, no! he had to go. He just missed being scalped then."

"This Russ Quinn is dangerous," Eve said. "He doesn't think right. I don't understand such men. They are cold and deadly, like a rattlesnake. It's not as though he and Mr. Sibley were going to fight fair and square, though heaven knows that would be bad enough."

"I've told myself all that," said Tilatha wearily. "But what can we do? Nothing. Nothing at all." She looked at her watch. Fifteen minutes since she had left Boone.

A knock sounded on the door. Boone was there, two

men with him. They had a coil of rope, a pick, and a shovel.

Tilatha joined them. She and Boone led the way. They turned from the street and followed the trail she and Russ Quinn had taken.

"Not far from here," the girl said. "Over this way."

"Must be old Jim Bleam's hole," one of the men said.

"Better not crowd too close," Boone said. "More ground may be ready to cave in."

He dropped the slip noose of the rope over his head and tightened it around his waist. This done, he moved cautiously forward. The other end of the rope was in the hands of the men.

Near the edge of the pit he stopped. "Everything all right, Quinn?" he called.

There was no answer. He shouted a second time. Still no reply came to him.

"Is he—has something happened?" Tilatha asked.

"There's been another cave-in, looks like," Boone told her. "He doesn't answer. Nothin' to do but for me to go down an' find out what's wrong."

Her heart seemed to drop into her stomach. If there had been two earth slips, there might very easily be a third, especially if the soil was disturbed by the pressure of a man's weight upon it. But she said nothing.

"Gimme some slack, not too much," Boone said to the men. "The ground looks firmer on the other side. Circle round thataway. Correct. Now, pay out rope as I call for it."

Close to the edge of the pit, he lay face down and wriggled backward till his toes kicked into space. Very

cautiously he worked himself over. He could see the trickling of rubble, could feel the ground softening and cracking beneath his weight.

"Now, then—slowly," he ordered. "The whole thing is ready to give if we're not careful. That's right. Easy now."

Foot by foot they lowered him. Little splashes of dirt struck now and again his upturned face. The stretch of starry sky above contracted as he went jerkily down. He guessed he must be twenty-five or thirty feet below the surface when his foot struck something solid.

This proved to be a timber jammed across the pit. An examination showed him that it was one of several. Either they had fallen or been flung in from above.

He had not brought with him a miner's lamp or candles, and in the darkness of the pit he had to feel rather than see the problem before him. There was dirt piled up on the timbers. How far below them the excavation went he could not tell. Quinn must be still lower, probably at the bottom of the shaft.

Boone called to him.

A voice answered: "'Lo! Who's that?"

The Texan did not give the information. "Come down after you," he said. "You hurt?"

"Busted my leg, I reckon. An' pretty near buried down here. Funny. I didn't hear you come down. Reckon I must have fainted."

"If I drop you a rope, can you hang on while they pull you out?"

"No. Pinned down by a timber an' smothered by dirt. Have to be dug out, looks like."

It was plain to Boone that he must have a light. The least misplacement of the timbering on which he stood might send half a ton of dirt plunging down upon the man below. He would have to work very carefully. Probably he would have to send the dirt up in buckets. But he could not be sure of this until he had examined the ground.

He called to the men above: "Send someone for candles and a bucket. Better get help. Have to dig him out, looks like."

Tilatha volunteered at once. "I'll go," she called down.

"Bring Dr. Peters, too—an' Whip Quinn," Boone said.

She flew down the path toward the lights of the town. It was a relief to her to be helping, even in so insignificant a rôle as that of messenger. That Boone and the man he had gone down to rescue were in danger she knew. The ground was very treacherous. Very likely it had been all ready for a cave-in, and the weight of Russ Quinn had started the slides. Probably there would be more, since the soil must have been disturbed by the lowering of the Texan. If buckets of dirt had to be hauled up, that would mean a further pressure on the crumbling edge of the pit.

Tilatha went straight to the Occidental. She spoke to a man lounging outside, and what she said was almost a cry.

"I want to see Mr. Whip Quinn, please. Right away."

The man looked at her curiously. She did not look like the sort of a woman who might be expected to stand

outside a gambling house and inquire for Whip Quinn. The standards of Tough Nut in regard to its women were simple. They were either straight or they were not. This girl with the honest, direct eyes, who had come running up the street with supple grace, was straight beyond any question. Therefore it was odd that she had come here, so hurried and eager and yet fearful, inquiring for Whip Quinn of all men.

"I'll get him, miss," the lounger said.

Three minutes later Whip Quinn joined the girl on the sidewalk. "You want to see me?" he said; then recognized her. "What can I do for you, Miss McLennon?"

"Russ has fallen into a prospect hole," she explained. "They're tryin' to get him out, but they want candles an' a bucket an' more men."

"Fallen in a prospect hole—where?" he asked.

She waved her hand impatiently in the direction of the place. "It's the old Jim Bleam hole. We must hurry. The ground is cavin' in. Better take another rope, too, I think."

Whip woke to action. He called to a passing man:

"Tim, get a coupla more miners an' come with me. Russ has fallen into a shaft. Can you dig up a bucket to haul dirt up in? I'll get candles an' a rope. Meet you here in five minutes." He turned to Tilatha. "Stay right here till I come back. Won't be gone more'n three-four minutes."

She paced up and down the busy street. Men looked at her with curiosity. The unwritten law of the town was that only women of a certain class should be seen at

this end of Apache Street after dark. Some of the men jostling along the crowded thoroughfare knew her by sight, but even those who did not were aware that this red-haired beauty with the big troubled eyes was one not to be addressed with familiarity.

A cowboy bowlegged along the sidewalk. Tilatha recognized him as Ted Holliday, the lad she had sent to bring her brother in an hour of trouble at Galeyville.

At sight of her he exclaimed: "Why, Miss Tillie!"

"There has been an accident, Ted," she explained hurriedly. "We need a doctor. Get Dr. Peters, if you can. Do you know where the old Jim Bleam prospect hole is? Of course you don't, but plenty of people can tell you. Get the doctor an' bring him there."

"Sure," Ted promised. "I'll most certainly do that."

In his hurry to oblige her, he went away without asking who had been hurt.

Whip Quinn was back almost within the time he had allotted. While they waited for the miners, he asked questions.

"How come Russ to fall in? What was he doing there, anyhow?"

"We went for a walk an' stopped there. He stepped too close, an' the ground caved under him."

"Is he hurt?"

"He told me only bruised. I came down an' got help. Boone Sibley was lowered into the hole an' from something he said I thought Russ might be hurt. He wanted me to bring a doctor—Boone Sibley, I mean. I've sent Ted Holliday for one."

Quinn frowned at her. "Did you say Boone Sibley?"

"Yes. He's down there with Russ. The ground round the edge is cavin' in. I'm afraid, if we don't hurry——"

"How come this Texas man to go down there?" demanded Quinn harshly.

"Why, he was the first man I spoke to about it. He got two men an' a rope an' started back with me. He just put the rope around his waist an' went down."

The miner to whom Quinn had spoken showed up down the street. He had with him two other men and a mule. Upon the mule's back was a pack saddle, from which were suspended a bucket, a shovel, and a pick.

"Found these lads down at the corral all fixed to go prospectin' to-morrow," Tim told Whip. "So we didn't lose any time. All ready now?"

The little party moved down the street and took the trail for the Jim Bleam mine. Whip led the way, with long swift strides. To keep up with him, Tilatha had at times to break into a run. He said no more. She wondered what was in his mind. Was it filled with concern for his brother, or with fury at the Texan who had dared to do the Quinns a service after they had declared war on him? She could not tell. There were deep dark chasms in the soul of such a man not to be plumbed. What he might mean to do, if his intentions were yet clear to himself, was a riddle beyond the solving.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"A CLOSE CALL"

TO THE Texan came booming down Whip Quinn's voice. "Come up outa there, you. I'll take charge of this job myself."

Evenly Boone answered: "Too risky, Quinn. Ground is shaky above an' below here on the timbers both. We'd sure start an avalanche an' bury yore brother. He has got to be dug out as it is."

The imprisoned man reinforced this argument. "That's right, Whip. Bad enough now without another cave-in. Leave it the way it is."

The miners who had come with Whip took the same position, and the gambler gave way.

Candles were lowered in a bucket along with a pick and shovel. Anxiously Boone watched his supplies come bumping down. He lighted a candle and made an inspection of the bottom of the shaft. Russ was pinned down by a bit of planking, the end of which stuck out from a mass of earth which covered the rest of it.

With great caution Boone slipped down through a narrow opening. He took the shovel with him. As he raised the candle to see what was the best way of getting to work, Quinn recognized him.

"You!" he exclaimed.

The Texan nodded, without answer, unless it was one

to say, "A bad business. We've got to go mighty carefully about this."

He stuck the candle on an outcropping ledge and began to shift the loose earth toward the other side of the shaft.

"Get outa here," Quinn said bitterly. "Send someone else."

"Like to oblige you if I could, but I reckon we got to play the cards the way they are dealt. . . . Sing out if I hurt you."

"I don't want you here, Texas man. Get out."

Boone continued to shift the earth. It was possible that he might get enough of it away to remove the plank without having to send any up in a bucket. "No use you or me either buckin' about this, Quinn," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "We're here, you an' me both. You can cuss me out after we get back above—if we ever do. No sense in us actin' like children, especially when we've got to pull together to make the grade."

Russ said no more. What was there to say? He knew that this quiet, imperturbable man would pay no attention to him.

Presently Boone handed him the candle to hold. "See better with it there," he said.

The pinioned man took the candle in his free hand. After a little Boone put down the shovel and began scooping away loose dirt with his hands. He released Quinn's arm.

From above Whip Quinn called down: "How about it now?"

"We're diggin' out," the Texan reported. "Takes time, but we're makin' progress. Looks like we won't have to send any dirt up if we're lucky."

He shovelled industriously but cautiously. He did not want to shift the dirt below in such a way as to bring down that which was resting on the timbers. Again he laid aside the shovel.

"Maybe if I eased up this timber you could get yore leg out from under," he suggested.

With both hands he lifted, very slowly, the end of the broken plank. Inch by inch, Quinn edged back, dragging his injured leg. Boone's muscles grew taut under the strain of the weight, but he did not lower the timber until the other man was free. Then, again with the greatest care, he released his hold.

Dirt had been trickling down from above in little spurts ever since he had began to work. Now a small rivulet of it poured upon them.

"Have to go up an' help haul you after me," Boone said.

He wriggled through the opening in the broken timbers.

"Now, if you'll crawl up as far as you can," he suggested.

There was no time to lose. The disturbed earth was pouring down into the cavern rapidly. Quinn had to get out or be caught, this time in such a position that Boone would not be able to get at him.

Quinn pushed head and shoulders through the opening and stuck. His legs were caught by the rising tide

of rock and earth. Boone stooped, slid his hands beneath the armpits of the trapped man, and heaved upward with all the strength that was in him.

A ton of loose earth went down with a rush, but the body of Russ Quinn rested safely on the cross timbers. He looked at his rescuer and said faintly but evenly, "Close call."

"Make ready up there," Boone shouted.

"Got him loose?" Whip asked.

"Yes. Wait till I give the word."

Boone undid the rope from the bucket and tied it around the waist of Russ Quinn.

The man looked at him defiantly. "You first. I'm not going up first." His voice was low. The last slide had jarred him badly.

"Don't be foolish. It's got to be thataway. I can look after myself. You can't."

"No, sir. Like enough the first one up will jar loose another ton or two of rock. I'll wait."

He was too feeble to make his protest effective. Boone made sure the rope was fast and called to those above:

"All ready. Easy now."

Quinn's body began to jerk upward. It swung to and fro as it struck the side of the shaft. Boone gave directions even as he refastened about his own body the other rope.

"Easy there! Easy! Go slow near the top. That's right."

Russ hung close to the edge. A rope end was tossed to him. He caught at it and was dragged forward to the treacherous ground

A woman's voice lifted in a shout of terror: "Look out!"

Boone saw it coming, another slide of dirt and rock, started by the weight of the rescued man. He clung close to the wall, sheltering his head with his arms. Most of the plunging mass missed him, but he did not escape entirely. His body swayed. He had a feeling of being flung far into space at a tangent, of floating high on waves of ether. Then he knew no more.

CHAPTER XXXVII

WOMEN HANGING AROUND

BOONE opened his eyes upon a world which needed a moment for orientation. The harsh face of Whip Quinn, flung into relief by the flames of a fire that had been built, looked grimly down at him. A score of other men, miners, cowboys, clerks, made a background silent and attentive.

The Texan's wandering glance came back to Quinn. He noticed that the gambler's long broadcloth coat was stained with dirt and that his usually immaculate boots were soiled to the top of the legs into which the lower part of the trousers had been thrust.

There flashed back to Boone a memory of the scene through which he had just passed.

"Yore brother all right?" he asked.

Whip did not answer. His deep fierce eyes burned down at the other out of a black face, an effect of darkness produced by hair, eyebrows, moustache, and imperial rather than by the colourless complexion. He turned abruptly away and shouldered a path through the crowd.

Vaguely Boone had been aware that his head rested on a pillow. Now he made the discovery that this pillow was a woman's lap. His gaze lifted, met brown eyes.

anxious and disturbed, in the tawny depths of which strange lights flickered. The red-haired girl, of course, who had been so present in his life of late even when bodily absent.

He made an attempt to raise his head, but she gently pressed her hand against his shoulder.

"Better wait till the doctor sees you," she said.

"How did I get here?" he asked. "Last I knew I was in the shaft."

"Whip Quinn went down after you. There was another slide, an' it half buried you. Are you in much pain?" Her voice was low.

"Some. Bruised up, I reckon. How about him?"

"Whip Quinn?"

"No, Russ."

"Dr. Peters has been examining him. We don't know yet. You mustn't talk."

Boone had the natural outdoor man's objection to being considered an invalid. He felt ashamed to lie there with his head on the lap of a woman. It was not only the fact itself that embarrassed him, but the presence of so many watching men.

"Sho! Nothin' the matter with me. I'll sit up, miss, an' not discommode you," he said.

In spite of the pressure of her strong brown hand he sat up. His head swam dizzily, and his fingers caught at her arm. The semicircle of faces tilted skyward. He found himself being forced down again.

Presently he was aware of extraneous pressure on his body, moving expertly from point to point.

"Ouch!" he grunted, and opened his eyes.

Dr. Peters spoke crisply. "Bring that other door here. We'll carry him to town. That's right. . . . Easy with him, men."

Thomas Turley pushed forward. "Take him to my house, Doctor. We can look after him better than they can at the hotel."

The inarticulate protest of the patient was entirely disregarded.

"I'd better hurry back an' talk with Eve about a bed," Tilatha suggested.

"Do that," assented Dr. Peters. "And have hot water ready."

Tilatha woke up to the fact that the eyes of many silent men were upon her. She had till now been quite unself-conscious, her whole being absorbed in the drama of life and death that had been playing with her lover as the leading character. But the intentness of the gaze focussed upon her was startling. Here was public opinion in the process of making its judgment. An imperative urge rose in her to escape, to be alone in the night where the cool breeze might fan her hot cheeks while she thought things out with none to observe.

"I'll go with you, Tilatha," the editor said.

"No—no, you stay with Mr. Sibley," she urged, and almost fled down the path.

The night breeze did not take the heat out of her cheeks. What had she done? How completely had she given herself away? Was it not bad enough to be in love—oh, sunk fathoms deep beyond recovery—with a man who cared nothing about her, who had brusquely repelled her more than once, without making an oppor-

tunity to show it to every Tom, Dick, and Harry in town? No wonder they had stared at her. Why, she had been as bad as the women who worked the dance halls of Apache Street at night, as flagrant in her conduct. A girl, not married, the only woman in a crowd of men, and she had rushed forward to take his head on her lap, to bathe his face with the water someone had brought up. It was slight comfort to remember that she had given Russ water, too.

All over town the gossip about her would run, of how unmaidenly she had been, of how she was flinging herself at the head of this Texan who in his heart, no doubt, despised her. As soon as she could, to-morrow, she would go back to the ranch and bury herself there. That was the least she could do. And as long as she lived she would never marry. No, never!

As soon as she had told Eve what was wanted, the two girls flew to make ready. Tilatha lit the kitchen fire while her friend prepared her own bed for the patient. They were barely ready when men's footsteps could be heard coming down the walk and shuffling along the porch.

They brought Boone in, though he protested that he did not want to be such a nuisance, that he would be all right at the Dallas House if they would only take him there.

Dr. Peters smiled at him. "You'll take orders from me, Mr. Sibley, for quite a few days—from me and from your nurses. The young ladies are going to look after you. Let me tell you that you are lucky. Two of the prettiest girls in Cochise County will cool your fevered

brow. I know plenty of men would be grateful for the opportunity."

The Texan made objection: "Look here, Doctor, I've been stove up a lot worse than this without having two women hanging around. Not necessary. I'd rather be at the hotel." At that moment he happened to catch a glimpse of a blonde seventeen-year-old making a face at him. "Of course, I appreciate their kindness, but I don't aim to invite myself here an' take up their time. That's short an' sweet."

"You'll do exactly as I say, young man. You've been cock of the walk long enough. Now, lie down and let me examine you. Not another word out of you."

So Boone occupied the best room in the Turley house. The doctor did not keep his promise. The chief nurse was the Mexican woman, who was relieved in the kitchen by Eve and Tilatha. Occasionally, the girls came in and sat with him in place of Juanita, especially after the first two days, when he began to mend rapidly. Peters had been afraid of internal injuries, but the patient had escaped with some broken ribs.

"How is Russ Quinn getting along?" he asked the doctor one day.

"Famously. You men out in this country take a lot of killing. Even old Jacobs has been demanding a steak smothered in onions. I've told Brady to see he gets it to-night."

"Fine," Boone said drily. "You'll have us ready to be shot up in a week or so. This ought to be a good country for a doctor."

Tilatha came into the room carrying E. P. Roe's new

novel *Without a Home*. She had been reading it to the patient, who did not care for it in the least but had reasons of his own for not telling her so.

"Your patient is doing fine, Miss Tillie," the doctor said.

"He's not my patient but Juanita's, so I can't take any credit, Doctor," she said. "He's fretting to get up, I s'pose to hunt bandits. Isn't it a sign he's gettin' better when he's so impatient?"

"Is he impatient?" Peters asked, with a quizzical lift of the eyebrows toward her.

"Too many women hanging around. Of course he appreciates our kindness, but——"

"That little minx told you I said that," he interrupted.

"Miss Eve Turley told me."

"Maybe I'd better take back that minx right away," Boone said, with a grin. "Women tell all they know. If you're tellin' her anything, say I think she's just about the prettiest little trick that ever came down Apache Street, an' that'll be the truth, too."

"As well as that she's a minx, you mean."

"I leave it to you, Doctor, if there's not more mischief hatched in that head of Miss Eve's, spite of her lookin' like an angel ready to flutter wings, than——"

At this apropos moment Eve walked in, made eyes at Boone and at the doctor, and asked jauntily: "How's everybody?"

"Everybody is on the mend, my dear," Dr. Peters answered. "What mischief are you hatching now, you little minx?"

Eve Turley was nobody's fool. She recognized quotations in the voice of the physician.

"Who said that?" Her eyes swept the room and found the guilty party. "You did, Mr. Sibley, and only this morning I gave you a cup of cold water, except that it was a glass, but it's all the same."

"He also said you were the prettiest girl who ever came down Apache Street," Peters added.

Eve dimpled. "Did he? He's improving. I don't mean his health." She proceeded to pay off her score at once. "Do you remember when I told you what a duffer is, Mr. Sibley? If you don't, I'll be glad to recall time and circumstance."

Boone flushed. "I remember," he said hastily.

"A minx would probably go into particulars," she mused aloud.

"I took that word back right away. Fact is, I meant it for a compliment. A right lively young lady was what I had in mind to say."

She curtsied, laughing. "I've forgotten about the duffer incident, sir," she assured him.

The doctor and Eve went out of the room together. They were great friends, and she wanted to go driving with him. Tilatha asked Boone if he wished her to read to him.

"Please."

He settled himself to watch the play of her face as she read. The book struck him as milk-and-water stuff, but it had become important to him to keep her in the room as long as possible.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHIP FREES HIS MIND

BOONE sat on the porch of the Turley house absorbing sunshine. He was mending rapidly. It is no light thing to have a ton of rock and dirt come plunging thirty feet down a well upon one. Fortunately, most of it had missed him. He could feel strength flowing back into his supple muscles. Soon he would be on his feet again.

Heat bubbles danced in the air as he looked up the street. This was the quietest time of the day in Tough Nut. During the morning Apache Street looked peaceful as old age. The ribald noises of the night had died away. An occasional woman went in or out of a store. Two shoppers stopped to gossip. The upper block, devoted to gaming, drinking, and kindred pursuits, showed no sign of life whatever.

Boone's glance picked up a man moving down the street, one who walked with a long, easy stride. Just then a young woman stepped out upon the porch. She had a glass of milk into which an egg had been beaten. The patient looked at it with humorous despair. He had been forced to surrender to the fiction that he was a convalescent whose appetite must be coaxed. It was true that he had been jarred pretty badly, but already

he was acquiring again the healthy hunger of a range rider.

"Drink this," Tilatha ordered.

"Yes'm," he said humbly.

"How are you feelin' this mornin'?"

"Pretty bad. I don't reckon I could fling a two-year-old dogie more'n twenty or thirty feet by the tail. As Mobeetie Bill usta say, 'I'm sure a poor stove-up ol' donker.' I won't hardly make the grade likely."

He drank the milk. As he handed the glass back to Tilatha he saw that her eyes were on the man striding toward them. Boone looked at him. He identified the broad-shouldered figure in the long black coat and wide-rimmed hat. Whip Quinn, and, if Boone was any judge, not taking a stroll for his health.

The gambler turned in from the sidewalk at the Turley house.

The girl's eyes dilated. The heart died under her ribs. What did he want? Had he come to exact delayed vengeance for his imaginary wrongs?

With unwavering gaze the Texan watched the approaching man. The deputy sheriff was unarmed. He felt a hot prickling of the skin in spite of an impassive face. Yet he did not believe Quinn had come to kill him, not while he was still commonly regarded as a sick man. That would not be in character for Whip as Boone read the man. Whatever his faults, the gambler had an arrogant courage that disdained to take such advantage of an enemy.

Quinn's black eyes fastened to those of Boone

Neither of the men spoke. In that long look neither of them yielded so much as the blinking of the lashes.

Tilatha said quietly, suppressing fear, "Will you sit down, Mr. Quinn?"

Then Whip's harsh voice sounded, speaking not to her but to the Texan: "I came to bring a message to this girl from Russ. He wants to see her. Since I'm here, I'll tell you where we stand, fellow. I'd made up my mind to call for a showdown, to sleep on yore trail till we got you. You're a meddler, an' you're a biggity one. We'd put up with a lot from you, but we were through. Texas warriors can't crowd us, I'd have you know. Why, you poor fool, the boys would have got you long ago if I hadn't held them back. You wouldn't be warned. You kept pushin' in, crowdin' yore luck an' headin' straight for Boot Hill. Fellow, yore hour was set."

The steady, watchful gaze of Boone did not relax. He said nothing. As yet he did not want to commit himself, for Quinn's remarks were by way of preliminary. He had not come to the meat of his message.

"Your'e the big auger here now, Texas man, by yore way of it," Quinn went on bitterly. "You whopped a bunch of fools like Curt French an' Brad Prouty, so you got all het up with the idea that you'd beat the Quinns. Why, we hadn't lifted a hand—hadn't begun to fight."

"Why should you fight me?" Boone asked quietly. "I'm not lookin' for trouble with you. I've never done anything against you, unless you claim partnership

with the killers an' bad men we've had to round up."

"Are you makin' any charges against me, sir?" Quinn asked, his voice ominously low.

"No, sir, I'm not. We've got no evidence whatever connecting you with any crime. I say only that some of yore friends are bad Injuns."

"Leave my friends alone," the gambler went on darkly. "An' listen, fellow. You're safe, far as we're concerned. When you went down that shaft after Russ you did yoreself a mighty good turn an' us a mighty poor one. Our hands are tied. You're poisonous to me as a sidewinder. I hate every hair of yore head, an' I'd like to fight you at every turn of the road. You're a fourflushin' advertiser, by my way of it. But we can't touch you, me or Russ either, an' I'll see the other boys don't."

"You owe me no more than I do you," Boone reminded him. "I went down after yore brother. You went down after me. Honours easy."

"Did you think I'd stay up above an' let folks think I was a quitter after what you did for Russ?" Quinn demanded fiercely. "Hadn't been for that, I'd have left you there till you rotted. I'm no soft-headed fool. But it's not the same. I won't argue with you. Point is, we can't touch you. But, by Godfrey, we won't live in the same town with you—not a day longer than we can help. We're pullin' our freight to-morrow, all of us."

Tilatha cried out, a little exclamation of glad relief; then, to cover it, asked a question. "But the Occidental?"

He looked at her. "Sold out, lock, stock, and barrel.

Why not? This town's on the down grade, anyhow. The mines have passed their peak. I've made enough money to burn a wet mule. If I didn't feel thataway, maybe I'd stay an' make things interesting for this Texas warrior who is such a wonder." Abruptly he asked: "You going back with me to Russ now?"

"Yes," she answered. "Soon as I get my hat."

CHAPTER XXXIX

TILATHA ANSWERS A QUESTION

BOONE watched Tilatha go with Whip Quinn and made no protest. Yet he was more than a little anxious. What did Russ want to see her for? That the man was in love with her, Boone did not doubt. Very likely he wanted to urge her to marry him before he left town. If so, would she accept?

Russ had the dark good looks, the reckless audacity that might very well captivate a woman. He was arrogant and masterful. Against her judgment Tilatha's heart might long ago have gone out to him.

As though she were not beside him, Whip strode up the street with long, easy steps. She had, as once before, to break into occasional little runs to keep pace with him. Presently the man brought his churning thoughts back and noticed that he was going too fast. He slackened his speed.

"Excuse me," he said. "Forgot about you."

"Do you wear seven-league boots, Mr. Quinn?" she panted.

"Not used to walkin' with ladies. Reckon I got to thinkin' about something."

They turned in at the house where Russ roomed. He was sitting up in bed, pillows propped behind him. Whip brought a chair, and Tilatha sat down.

"I'll be on the porch. Call me when you want me," the older brother said.

"Your brother says you are leavin' to-morrow," the girl said as soon as they were alone. "Are you able to travel yet?"

He brushed her question aside as of no importance, but plunged at once into what he wished to say.

"You said I acted like I thought I was God Almighty or Satan—that when I got hell-bent on a thing, I rode over everyone else roughshod to get it."

Her friendly little smile asked forgiveness. "I said you an' I both."

"It's true. I don't deny it. I'd go through hell an' high water for what I want. The way I look at it, that's the difference between a man an' a mouse. If I ain't willin' to fight for a thing, I don't deserve it."

His deep-set eyes looked at her hungrily out of a hard, reckless face, one harsh and dominant, but certainly not mean. It came to her that the man had endured some kind of change of heart, that he had sent for her to make renunciation.

"That's the way I felt then. It's the way I feel now," he continued. "But things have come up. We're no short-card men, Whip or me either. If we stay here, we've got to kill that Texas warrior. Well, I can't kill him now—not after what he did. So we're pullin' out. . . . You won't go with me, Til?"

"I can't, Russ." Her low voice held distress, but it left no room for doubt.

"Why not?"

"How can I give reasons? Your ways are not my

ways, nor your thoughts mine. A man an' his wife have to walk together. They have to keep step all through life. They've got to be able to talk things out an' come to a decision that seems right to both."

"You mean I'm not good enough for you."

"I don't mean that at all. But we walk along different roads. Surely you can see that."

"I'll admit I'm not good enough in one way of speakin'. I've ridden wild trails, sure enough. But any man who is strong can make himself plenty good for any woman if he wants to." His saturnine face had a touch of wistfulness. "Maybe I've learned my lesson, Til—that I've got no right to ride down everyone in my way. Maybe if you'd gimme a chance you'd find me more reasonable."

She shook her head slowly. If he had come to her in this mood soon enough—— But, after all, that was the trouble, it was only a mood and not a conviction. Now it was too late, anyhow. There was another man in her life. Still, it distressed her to hurt him.

"I can't, Russ. I just don't—care for you that way."

"Come clean, girl. Is it someone else—that Texan?" he asked brusquely.

"He's never looked at me twice," she said.

"You're not answerin' my question. I asked if you're —what folks call in love with him?"

A rich bloom flooded her cheeks. The girl's honest eyes met Quinn's steadfastly.

"If he asked me to marry him, I'd say 'yes,'" she replied simply.

"You're ready to fall off the Christmas tree for him,"

he charged bitterly. "Whether he wants you or not. That it?"

It seemed to her that her face was on fire. "That's it exactly," she admitted, facing him with a kind of proud shame. Then, moved by swift impulse, "Don't blame him, Russ. It's all my fault. He can't help it if I'm such a fool."

He looked away from her, out of the window. But he did not see the desert across which the sun's rays streamed to the papier-mâché mountains beyond. Tilatha said no more. A sure instinct told her it was time for silence. He was fighting out once more the battle within himself.

"Don't let him come near me. Don't let me see him," he warned in a low thick voice. "An' about you, girl. 'Nough said. I know when I'm beat."

"I'm sorry, Russ," she said in a small humble voice.

"Don't you be sorry for me," he flung back roughly. "I ain't gonna fade out, you can bet yore boots, because of you or any other woman. Well, *adiós*."

"What about your cousin and Mr. Prouty?" she asked.

"We've talked that out with Brady. He's mighty willin' to turn loose of the bear, that hunter is. He has nothin' on them, anyhow, except jail breakin' an' knockin' out the old jailer. Not a thing else he can prove. The boys can walk out of the calaboose whenever we say the word."

"Will they leave town with you?"

"So they say. They're sull about it, but they're not sorry to go." He added bitterly. "So there will be a

clean sweep of the bad men an' riff-raff responsible for the evil in this nice church town."

"I never said that, Russ. I don't believe it. You know I never thought you a bad man. You were my friend."

"Let it go at that, then. They say the best of friends must part," he countered, derision in his voice.

"You'll shake hands, won't you?" she asked.

For a moment she thought he was going to refuse, then he struck his hand in hers. "All right. So long."

She walked out of the house to the porch and joined Whip.

"You needn't go back with me," she said.

Russ Quinn had at least a few minutes when he was first with her. As she went down the street her thoughts were with the man she had left and not with the one she was going to meet.

CHAPTER XL

THE LONG TRAIL

THEY rode the high trails together, Boone and Tilatha. Cochise Head was in front of them, and the sun was dropping behind it. As they moved along the hill shoulder, knee brushed against knee. The only sounds were the occasional clip of a horse's hoof striking a stone or the chuffing of the saddle leather.

On a bluff they stopped to look down on the sweep of rolling country below.

Boone broke the long silence. "Good to be here," he said.

She did not look at him. For it had come to pass with her that in his presence silence was more significant than speech. Then all her secret thoughts went trooping through her mind undisturbed by words.

"Yes," she said at last.

"Good to be here with you," he said more explicitly.

Womanlike, now that the hour she had longed for was at hand, she sought for little barriers to build against it.

"It's such a relief to know that nobody is waitin' for a chance to kill you, that all your enemies have ridden away an' left you unharmed. Sometimes it seems too wonderful to be true. At least, I'd think you'd feel so."

He smiled. "I'm a heap easier in my mind. But I was

talkin' about something else. I was talkin' about you an' me."

She flashed one swift glance at him, and then looked at Cochise Head, shining in the distance.

"Are we to travel the long trail together, Tilatha?" he asked simply. "That's what I've been wonderin' a heap."

She evaded an answer. "I thought you didn't like women."

Boone swung from the saddle, dropped the reins, and came to her. "I'm not sayin' anything about women, but about a woman. I like her a lot more than I ever expected to like one."

"Are you—so sure?" she murmured.

He drew her gently from the saddle into his arms. She rested there, content. Only her heart beat against his.

"Certain sure."

"How long have you known it?"

"Since one night you came over the roofs to save my life."

"And I—I found out the same day. But I think I always loved you. Don't you remember how the little red-head kissed you when you rode away into the Indian country, an' how furious it made you?"

He laughed. "Yes, but I liked the fiery little pest even when I hated her."

"But will you always—love me, knowing what I'm like?"

"It's because I know what you're like that I do—want you."

"My temper," she reminded him.

"If it's a part of you, I'm gonna like that, too."

"But I don't think it is, really. I've been different lately. I don't want to have my own way, whether or no. I've seen where that leads to. An' you're so much wiser than I am," she went on humbly. "I want to be like you."

"An' I want you to be like yoreself an' no one else."

He drew her soft tanned cheeks toward him, looked into the lovelit eyes, and kissed her lips. Her supple body made a little motion of abandon as her emotion met his.

The sun had set behind Cochise when once more they started on the long trail they are still riding in happiness and peace.

THE END

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